Coming to voice: Community radio production as critical pedagogy

Katie Moylan
University of Leicester, UK

Abstract
This article argues for the pedagogical possibilities of collective community radio show production for transnational students; in particular, identifying the capacities for self-representation for students from otherwise marginalised and under-represented communities. Students are tasked in this elective module to collectively produce a community-facing show for a multilingual Leicester community radio station; in emphasising collective production alongside critical unpacking of the diverse deployments of ‘community’, the module encourages reflective approaches to community and identity. Through analysing assessment parameters and examples from student-produced shows, I suggest that the theory into practice approach of teaching the value of community cultural production alongside training in production practice by community practitioners encourages student agency, within key approaches drawn on cultural studies and media studies. At the same time, I argue the module’s assemblage of informing theories and production practice comprises a worthwhile research focus for cultural studies itself, retrieving pedagogy as a critical practice historically central to cultural studies’ disciplinary preoccupations with everyday practice, identity formation and popular culture.

Keywords
collective production, community radio, critical pedagogy, cultural studies, gender representation, practice-based teaching, reflexivity, student agency, transcultural representation, voice

Situating her experiences in academia as student and professor, Sara Ahmed (2017) reminds us that ‘those of us who arrive in an academy that was not shaped for or by us...
bring knowledges, as well as worlds, that would not otherwise be here’ (p. 10). Amplifying diverse, multifaceted knowledges can only enrich university-based education as well as the wider student experience, in the process contributing and sharing strategies for negotiating those elements of a neoliberal, normative university which continues to privilege some groups above others. Faced with a university which may perform ‘inclusivity’ but in practice fail to facilitate this in curricula and provision of accessible, safe places and spaces, students who experience exclusion may choose to deploy Ahmed’s (2017) suggested strategy ‘to aim to reside as well as we can in the spaces that are not intended for us’ (p. 9), while simultaneously developing knowledge-led modes of expression and production to create new forms of articulation.

Expectations of third-level students in the United Kingdom are today caught between circulating normative assumptions about the career benefits of a university education and the hard truths of a precarious future, discursively framed by university systems which pledge (and advertise) commitments to greater inclusivity on one hand while persistently mining, then commodifying student experiences to feed into National Student Survey (NSS) and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) reporting on the other hand. In such a troubled context, the work of meaningful education is more acutely needed than ever and greater clarity is required on what pedagogy’s project should include and involve, as opposed to ‘deliver’. In this article, I argue that student capacities for societal critique can be usefully developed and expressed through collective and reflexive pedagogical and production practices which enable greater student agency through encouraging students to draw productively on their assembled knowledges and experiences as resources. I suggest that encouraging students to consider their own situated knowledges as a resource facilitates in-depth, reflective learning which resonates beyond the institution and the moment of graduation. To ground these arguments, I explore articulation strategies in student-produced radio shows, through which students express and reinforce diverse elements of their identity and experiences. Peter McMahon (2020) suggests that ‘critical pedagogy uncovers or otherwise identifies the enduring historical forces in educational discourses, practices, and value’ (p. 1244). He argues further that it has impacted the field of education organically, by serving systematically and habitually as a moral compass for the way we treat each other in the classroom and by contributing to the epistemological, ontological and axiological stances we take in the production of knowledge (McMahon, 2020: 1244)

It is critical pedagogy’s realised capacity for structural critique that has enabled the conditions of possibility for such critique, facilitating multiple, diverse and locally specific avenues for student enquiry. In my ‘Community Radio in Practice’ module, students are tasked to collectively identify and determine a target listening community and devise strategies to build community participation and sustain community listener interest in their broadcast radio show. The module encourages students to apply familiar concepts from cultural and media studies and recognise their usefulness in critical exploration, incorporating policies and structures of community radio alongside theories of representation and transcultural production. At the same time, the module’s assemblage of informing theories and collective and individual practice comprises an object for
scrutiny in cultural studies, retrieving pedagogy as a critical practice, historically central to cultural studies’ disciplinary preoccupations with everyday practice, identity formation and popular culture, in particular. Production strategies of community self-expression developed by students included choosing community-facing topics for in-studio discussion and coverage of local events and issues, alongside thematically curated music which reinforced a sense of community identity during the show. I argue that facilitating student-led radio production can create alternative spaces for nuanced, multifaceted expressions of community identity, deploying community radio’s considerable capacities for meaningful community-led representation (see Day, 2007; Gordon, 2011; Lewis and Booth, 1989; Moylan, 2018, 2019) By producing radio shows which mobilise the intimate capacities of live radio to meaningfully articulate common experiences and problems for each group’s defined community, students create a relatively unmediated space of expression which functions as an alternative to top-down media spaces, which historically offer less room to express and expand on their diverse experiences. In doing so, students can put into practice what they have learned about such top-down and reductive representations by producing a show enabling self-representation. Through collective radio production, students produce their own interventions into the wider pantheon of cultural and media texts.

The module situates students as knowledge producers through this collective work, informed both by critical theories and by their expanding understanding of ways in which their subjectivities are constructed through the production of alternative cultural texts. Placing cultural and media production at the centre of a given module enables and encourages students to wield their growing critical capabilities in the production of particular artefacts which embody alternative and critical forms of self-representation; these take multiple forms, incorporating alternative archives, short videos and zines (Houma, 2016; Shayne et al., 2016). Through collective programme production and later in individual ‘critical reflection’ assignments, students are encouraged to explore the possibilities offered by the alternative and unmediated communication modes which typically characterise community media. In addition, both the collectively produced show and individual critical reflection assessments enable active critique (through reference and by comparison) of mainstream modes of representation which sideline and de-emphasise representation of marginalised communities and groups. The University of Leicester, where I teach, attracts a particularly diverse student body. Our Media and Communication and Media and Society BA programmes typically include students from mainland China and Hong Kong, the Middle East and South Korea as well as elsewhere in Europe, alongside UK students primarily from London and the English midlands. In 8 years of teaching media and social theory to diverse student groups at Leicester, I have found that collectively drawing on our distinctly varied experiences of media, but also of education, everyday life, and family and social expectations can yield a productive classroom enriched by comparative discussion and fuelled by expression of diverse experiences. Teaching in the context of such multiple and varied student experiences – but also fundamentally all teaching – requires us to meet students where they live and to work with them to recognise and draw on their individual situated knowledges as experiential resources. These can then be considered productively alongside, and connected to, circulating cultural and media representations, in order to more thoroughly identify, recognise, critique and/or
challenge ways in which such representations either resonate with students’ multiple and divergent experiences, or (more commonly) reduce and repackage these for easier, simpler consumption.

At this 2021 moment of writing, as Darren Webb (2018) persuasively argues, the corporatised UK university comprises ‘a marketized sphere in which the costs of education are shifted from the state onto students [and] students are positioned as consumers of an individual investment’ (p. 96). If anything, this framing of students as active consumers has only been heightened in the COVID-19 context, in which students are asked to self-regulate alongside accepting online teaching conditions as standard, and continue to pay for the opportunity. University life is today ‘packaged as the “student experience” where the most predominant imperative is employability’, as stated back in 2010 by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), and as noted by Mike Neary (2012: 2). In this entrenched, de-politicised, individualised context ‘the university uses the discourse of diversity and inclusion as a rhetorical tool to manufacture consent and mask organisational whiteness’ (Webb, 2018: 97). This ‘organisational whiteness’ is additionally deployed to discourage and opacify university Black and minority ethnic (BAME) student and staff experiences of and complaints against ongoing institutional discrimination, as reported on the Guardian’s front page in July 2019.3 Given this array of optical illusions, it is essential that we as educators illuminate and reflect on our privileged subjectivity and begin to unmask and unpeel the layers of an opaque rhetoric which celebrates ‘diversity’ without engaging with the ongoing experiences of inequity which characterise and comprise everyday life for anyone marginalised or discriminated against on the basis of ‘difference’. In the context of such performative foregrounding of ‘diversity’ in UK university contexts, I consider modes of expression within student-produced radio shows developed as module assessments, in which diverse student groups articulate their varied experiences in nuanced and complex ways.

The assessment criteria call for each student group to produce a 2-hour show to broadcast live on Leicester community station EA V A FM, where the show can be heard in real time through online streaming or locally on 102.5FM in Leicester. The expressive strategies of these shows are developed as part of pedagogical work foregrounding individual and collective articulations of identity and reflexive practice, in the process building understanding of what can comprise ‘community’. I suggest the module’s focus on developing production skills simultaneously engages with an insistent institutional emphasis on employability as central to student curricula but repurposes this production focus into something both more concrete and more actively capable of producing critique through identity articulation and subsequently in students’ individual critical reflections. The module provides students with the opportunity to grapple with the problems of often limiting and reductive top-down cultural and media representations of the communities they belong to, following Paulo Freire’s (1993: 52) call for ‘problem-posing education’ which foregrounds active engagement with ‘the problems of human beings in their relations with the world’. Problem-based research has historically been a cornerstone of cultural studies, with questions of identity and subjectivity at its core, as described by Stuart Hall (1990):
from the start we said: What are you interested in? What really bugs you about questions of culture and society now? What do you really think is a problem you don't understand out there in the terrible interconnection between culture and politics? What is it about the way in which British culture is now living through its kind of postcolonial, posthegemonic crisis that really bites into your experience? And then we will find a way of studying that seriously. (p. 17)

Theorising the student within a ‘problem-posed curriculum’ (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1998: 4), I build on Neary’s (2012) idea of the student as producer, in which he argues that the student can become a producer of meaning in the classroom and expand on this to consider the student as practitioner, a term which encapsulates the holistic work of production planning, presenting, researching and cuing music and station IDs, and underscores this assembled work as practice. The student producer of a radio show gains concrete media production skills, developing employability in the sector from both an institutional and pragmatic perspective. Yet, through the production process, she or he also generates a collectively conceived of idea of community, which in turn serves as the basis for the critical reflection assignment. I propose here that the open-ended processes of collective radio production have the capacity to overturn and repurpose top-down notions of employability skills, while simultaneously enabling recognition of and engagement with the wider and more nuanced expressive possibilities of grassroots community articulations.

I conceived of the module ‘Community Radio in Practice’ by drawing directly on my own research into Canadian, Irish and UK community radio in which I explore community-led programming and production practices structurally conceived of as fundamentally inclusive. This research led me to a widening recognition of community radio’s diverse provision of alternative spaces for community-led articulation for marginalised groups under- or unrepresented in mainstream media forms. Defined by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as radio managed and produced by and for the community, community radio responds to the diverse needs of communities in distinct and specific ways depending on local and social contexts. As online streaming has improved, this profoundly localised cultural form has simultaneously become global in reach and scope. In so far as community radio’s political function of facilitating grassroots representation has always been inseparable from its formal functionality (with questions of equitable representation informing station schedules and inclusive production practices), both community radio’s function and form have evolved alongside shifts in media platforms and provision. No longer necessarily perceived as niche, community radio – whether streamed or broadcast through analogue signal – is increasingly one form among multiple media accessed across varied platforms in everyday life.

Following approval of the new module in School meetings and by the Head of School, I introduced Community Radio in Practice in the autumn semester of 2017/2018. The module is an option open to third year BA Media and Community and BA Media and Society students on a first come, first served basis. Numbers are capped at 15 to ensure that all students are fully trained in production before on-air shows are programmed on the EAVA FM schedule and to ensure that no group exceeds three people. The module incorporates the following three assessments: one collectively produced 2-hour radio
show, broadcast live and two individual assignments: an advance programme running order, and a critical reflection on the show following broadcast. The broadcast show represents the most significant assessment in the module, comprising 50 percent of the overall grade. The show’s broadcast content is collectively assessed, meaning that students in each group rely on each other to achieve a good overall mark. To situate initial programme planning and provide context for all three assessments, I require that students produce a clear remit for their show, with the central guideline that it must be community-facing with the listening community clearly defined; this remit then informs and structures the running order. The target listening community and remit is self-determined by each group. ‘Community’ is a persistent and pervasive concept with multiple connotations and instrumental uses, because of its diverse and often divergent discursive deployments. ‘Community’ can be used in a geographically specific sense (to refer to a specific neighbourhood ‘community’); in a global sense (as a unifying discursive device: ‘the international community’); as a professional designation (the ‘intelligence community’) and as a top-down signifier of cultural, ethnic and/or linguistic affiliations, employing the definite article to infer singularity: the Black community, the feminist community (tendencies unpacked by John Downing, 2001). The notion of ‘community’ is often deployed in romanticised and often celebratory narratives of self-subsistence and unity, but also of inclusivity. ‘Community’ remains ‘one of the most motivating discourses and practices circulating in contemporary society’, as Miranda Joseph (2002: xxx) argues, thus communities can be ‘our sites of hope in a difficult world’ (p. ix).

I suggest, drawing on Joseph and David Harvey, that ‘community’ can be most usefully considered as an ongoing series of practices. Collective cultural practices can be mobilised to reproduce and reinforce a communal subjectivity (which retains fluidity so as to evade determinist definitions), which can then usefully unsettle and replace the static role of ‘identity’ as a determining factor in defining a given community. Joseph (2002) summarises this distinction: ‘I argue that communal subjectivity is constituted not by identity but rather through practices of production and consumption’ (p. viii). This understanding of community comprised an open-ended set of processes directly informs my framing of how community radio works (for producers and for listeners), which underpins and further explains the module title of ‘Community Radio in Practice’.

For module students, therefore, the target ‘community’ for their proposed show can be widely conceived of, comprising (for example) a community of cultural or linguistic affiliation or a community of interest around a particular subculture. In the 2017/2018 cohort, shows were produced for the following communities, as determined by each group: international university students, rave music subculture, Slavic university students, urban music culture. The 2018/2019 cohort similarly zeroed in on their fellow university students as their target community, with shows again dedicated to international (with an emphasis on Chinese) students; students negotiating mental health issues, and women students. The remit requirement is introduced relatively early in the semester, in part to focus students’ attention on who they want their listeners to be, and who they are speaking for. The community-facing remit informs and shapes both the show’s production and the subsequent individual critical reflection, but its first expression is in the first assignment: the show’s proposed running order. As this is a production tool for eventual use (in a subsequent version) at time of programme broadcast, my primary
assessment requirement for the running order is that students comprehensively demon-
strate community-facing strategies in the proposed 2-hour show. This requires students
to think carefully and concretely about who their target community comprises as they
determine which production strategies will be most effective in appealing to and engag-
ing with their chosen community of listeners.

The module is co-taught by two local radio practitioners from Leicester station EAVA
FM, who provide all production training and allocate airtime in the station schedule for
the resulting student-produced radio programmes. One of four licenced community radio
stations in Leicester, EAVA FM’s remit is to represent the city’s established and substan-
tial cultural and linguistic diversity, ‘celebrating the richness of culture!’ as their station
ID jingle proclaims. EAVA FM defines itself as a multilingual station and this is reflected
in their broadcast programme schedule, which incorporates programmes by and for mul-
tiple linguistic communities including Hindi, Gujarati, Polish, Punjabi, Somali, Swahili,
Tamil and Urdu programming, alongside English language programming in allocated
slots. In their production classes, station manager Vijay Umrao and producer and techni-
cian Bhavik Solanki situate technical training within the station’s community-facing
remit and its requirements, as presented in the station’s ‘Key Commitments’ which state
their commitment to and compliance with the terms of their community broadcast
licence. I introduce the aims and structure of Community Radio in Practice in the first
class, providing a module overview and outlining central theoretical concepts for under-
standing the political and societal value of ‘community’, acknowledging and unpacking
its many cultural and political deployments. ‘Community radio’ provides a productively
alternative site for student learning across several registers: they learn about collective
production practices in the context of the structural elements of a community station
(including material conditions and policy requirements) alongside understandings of the
inclusive ethos of community radio. ‘Community radio’ is also a rich site for theoretical
explorations into questions around equitable representation, media ownership, grass-
roots production and medium specificity. The already interdisciplinary areas of cultural
studies and media studies furnish critical approaches to situate these ideas. Course read-
ings are drawn from cultural studies and media studies alongside EAVA FM and Ofcom
materials on radio practice.

The everyday nature of grassroots production practices enabling community self-
representation means that often community radio stations are dialectically informed both
by ideals of community (as experienced by the communities on the ground) and require-
ments of station infrastructure (as determined by legislative and material conditions,
from the top down). Community media generally considers itself as comprising ‘institu-
tions responsive to demands and priorities from below’ (Downing, 2001: 39). The mod-
ule focus on collective programme production foregrounds, and insists on, meaningful
self-representation of the self-identified community whom the programme is designed to
serve. Many media studies courses necessarily incorporate analysis of cultural and media
representations of diverse identities and communities across popular and niche media
platforms as a means of understanding how and where inequity in representation across
groups and communities persists. In its emphasis on radio production, Community Radio
in Practice enables students to deploy the means of production themselves and to create
community-led representations, allowing them to move beyond studying representation to undertaking production themselves.

The capacities of these shows for student expressions of ‘community’ can be helpfully understood in relation to Tanja Dreher’s (2010) useful framework illuminating the value of what she terms community media interventions. In her recognition of the capacity of community media interventions for necessary and nuanced self-representation of marginalised communities, Dreher argues that analysis of media representations of diversity must expand into three identified directions to effectively reframe how media produced by mis- or under-represented groups and communities can be more thoroughly examined and understood. She proposes a focus that, first, moves beyond representation; second, that foregrounds analysis of multiple publics; and third, that recognises the limitations to the ‘dilemma of inclusion’ (Dreher, 2010) in instances where marginalised groups are reductively represented in mainstream contexts. Dreher’s third direction of enquiry effectively expands upon the first; if studying mainstream modes of representation elides the role of community agency in community-led production (an omission demonstrating the need to move beyond such representations), the third direction grapples with normative practices in mainstream media comprising reductive ‘inclusion’ of marginalised groups in stories about the given community. In these stories, marginalised communities are represented, but in limited ways within a top-down normative framing. In contrast, in Dreher’s persuasive argument, community media interventions enable more nuanced and thorough self-representation of marginalised groups, to counter such reductive representations.

**Shows as spaces for transcultural expression: voicing ‘difference’ and experience**

At levels of production, management, ownership and dissemination, ‘community radio’ exemplifies independent media production and diversity in content within a media ecology characterised by cross-platform ownership, embedded and institutionalised production habits and homogenised and homogenising content which primarily functions to reinforce a status quo in UK media representation which persistently under-represents or marginalises BAME experiences and subjectivities in its programming. Simply considering community media as an alternative to ‘mainstream’ media incorporates some recognition of community media’s capacities for critiquing and challenging reductive representations of marginalised groups produced in mainstream content. However, this formulation is established along binary lines which merely reproduce limiting Oppositional conceptions of these spheres. Instead and more accurately, I argue that community media programmes and platforms occupy, comprise and serve multiple publics, enabling amplification of diverse experiences of and within community groups. In facilitating and sustaining complex spaces of community self-representation, this programming enables the creation of alternative publics coalescing around community-generated content, in turn enabling articulations of shared experiences of marginalisation (in particular) and strategies for negotiating these. Through community-produced content, community radio shows both comprise and harness the capacities of alternative publics to offer a
discursive counter-formation to that provided in dominant publics (a counterpublic) and an affective space of survival (an intimate public). Nancy Fraser (1993) conceptualises the counterpublic as a structural response to exclusion experienced by members of marginalised groups, in recognition that ‘members of subordinated social groups . . . have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics’ (p. 14). Lauren Berlant differentiates between a political imperative of self-representation which typifies the counterpublic and the affective capacities of the intimate public. From this standpoint, the counterpublic’s functionality can be considered as primarily political while the intimate public’s central function is the community’s affective survival (Berlant, 2008). However, I suggest that the two functions regularly and even necessarily overlap, as personal experiences can be effectively expressed in political terms, as the second wave feminist slogan ‘the personal is political’ crucially reminds us.

In recognition of this multiplicity of diverse publics, I consider the student-produced radio shows discussed here to be comprising, and in the process reinforcing and reproducing, these discrete but overlapping publics – each encompassing self-determined student communities within a wider Leicester ‘student community’, reflecting a diversity of student experience coalescing in groups based on shared affiliations – cultural, linguistic, regional or national, among others – and values. Shows produced by the 2018/2019 cohort express multiple and diverse negotiations of university-related anxiety and pressure, of gender identity identities, transcultural experiences and family expectations, and in the process articulate specificities of identity positionality as they relate to topics discussed in the show. In *What’s the Universitea?*, which focuses on a community of university students experiencing and negotiating stress, E and M discuss parental expectations from their families in relation to their becoming third-level students. In *What’s the Universitea?*, which focuses on a community of university students experiencing and negotiating stress, E and M discuss parental expectations from their families in relation to their becoming third-level students. Following a pre-recorded interview with a young Leicester entrepreneur, E explains her reaction to the entrepreneur’s story of starting a business instead of going to university:

I am so inspired . . . I could relate to him on so many levels. I mean, if I didn’t go to Uni, and told my mum I’m going to start my own business, because this is what I want to do, she would tell me, I’m going to book your flight back home, because you’re not serious: I brought you to this country for education and now you’re telling me you don’t want to study. Because education is so profound in our communities, especially Asian and African communities.

Another insight was expressed during *Through Our Eyes*, which is by and for a community of primarily Chinese students in Leicester. P brings up the topic of adjusting to life as a Chinese student in the United Kingdom, asking her co-presenters for their suggestions for ways to ‘integrate into the local students’. L’s voice takes on a thoughtful tone as she carefully develops a nuanced and in-depth response:

I think it’s actually, sort of things that people don’t talk about. Because usually when you see international students, from the interviews we’ve done, a lot of people say that international students stick with, maybe, people of their own country. Again, it’s something I think we all have experiences about, because we’ve been in this country for at least two and a half years now, and from time to time there are a couple of interesting things that I experienced, because of my accent: my accent fluctuates sometimes and people think I’m American. But in terms of interacting with people, I can’t say I’ve had 100% good experience with people, because there’s
always the bad part: you will hear racists comments, racial slurs, from time to time, but I’m kind of used to it already. So, what do you guys think?

As L speaks, J and P can be heard humming in agreement. Both instances enable articulation of the nuances, and contradictions, of diverse transcultural experiences in a more expansive forum, in contrast to instrumentalised soundbite opportunities granted to BAME students by mainstream media.

For BAME women, by BAME women: Dear Uni Girls

Dear Uni Girls was produced and presented by three women in the 2018/2019 cohort from diverse regional and national contexts: two (N and K) from different regions in England identifying as BAME and one, C, from Hong Kong. As the show unfolds within its 2-hour scheduled slot, on-air discussion and debate facilitate articulation of their three diverse perspectives, in turn enabling three distinct, relatable points of identification for listeners. In the assessment criteria for the running order, I asked that each group carefully consider how their show’s title reflected and represented their chosen community of listeners. The title ‘Dear Uni Girls’ explicitly describes the group’s chosen listening community, framed by a warm mode of address with ‘dear’. From the start, Dear Uni Girls signposts its inclusive project: explicitly through carefully chosen tracks by women artists carrying messages of empowerment, and an in-studio debate on the topic of ‘who do women wear makeup for?’; and implicitly in discussions prompted by coverage of female celebrity friendships and feuds. Throughout the show, the three practitioners refer to themselves as ‘girls’ and ‘uni girls’; in this usage, the term ‘girls’ comes across as engaging and relatable, helping to ground recurring discussions around issues experienced by young women at university in an accessible manner. A deliberately inclusive use of ‘girls’ is invoked in Brittney Cooper’s (2018) Eloquent Rage in which Cooper unpacks and analyses feminist harnessings of rage, female friendships and diverse solidarities; for Cooper (and the Dear Uni Girls group), the use of ‘girls’ underscores a female solidarity.

Dear Uni Girls speaks to and from its three diverse and relatable female university student perspectives. Each presenter or producer references cultural touchstones alongside everyday experiences in distinct and diverse ways. Yet, Dear Uni Girls also articulates shared transcultural commonalities, drawing particularly on popular culture such as celebrity culture and makeup practices. In planning the show, the three practitioners invoked inclusive strategies to make their show appealing to women undergraduate students, as they saw this widely defined community as one they all had in common, and which they considered in their individual critical reflections. When developing their running order, the three practitioners decided on topics which would be relatable to young women, but which would also enable expression of multiple points of view, as they recognised the need to provide more than one viewpoint on air. This approach widened the show’s capacity to appeal to a larger listening community, as listeners had a wider choice of perspectives they could potentially identify with. Indeed, reflecting on the show after broadcast, N discussed deliberately taking what she describes as a devil’s advocate stance on one discussion topic so as to expand the available points of view, and K
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confirms that she advocated for the inclusion of slang terms in common usage as another inclusive strategy. Much of the music chosen for *Dear Uni Girls* featured songs by female artists with positive and/or empowering lyrics, such as Beyoncé’s (2011) track ‘Run the World (Girls)’. Beyoncé represents a strong, successful, creative role model for many of my BAME women students and is regularly referenced as such in both my ‘Identity and Popular Culture’ module and in the ‘Media, Celebrity and Fan Culture’ module to which I contribute teaching. Lauryn Hill’s (1998) ‘Doo-Wop (That Thing)’ delivers an unambiguous series of messages exhorting women not to stand for being badly treated, and men to be more accountable for their behaviour. Hill’s lyric ‘don’t think I haven’t been through the same predicament’ is particularly potent in its inclusiveness, indicating she is speaking about a similar experience. The show also featured musician and ‘Leicester girl’ Mahalia, introduced by K, who asserts that as a local artist ‘she’s one of us, so you know we need to support her’.

Through this array of inclusive strategies enabling diverse and relatable on-air expression, I suggest *Dear Uni Girls* creates and reinforces an alternative public comprised and coalescing around shared, transcultural affective affinities. For this understanding, I draw on Berlant’s (2008) conception of an ‘intimate public’ and its expressive functions, to examine the show’s capacity for community-led articulations of experiences particular to young, transcultural women students. Common preoccupations for *Dear Uni Girls*’ affective public are celebrity activities, makeup practices and media preferences; in on-air discussions of each of these popular topics, the three producer-presenters connect the cultural practices discussed to their wider societal significance, and then back to the projected community of listeners. This reflective process reframes the popular culture tropes and reclaims them for the young women presenter-producers – and for their listeners. Throughout its 2-hour broadcast, *Dear Uni Girls* is persistently effective in enabling in-depth discussion in significant part because the show is well structured, providing discursive space for on-air expansions which are confidently taken up in turn by each of the show’s three practitioners. In these discursive expansions N, K and C regularly make connections between chosen topics and wider societal tropes such as gendered representation, celebrity culture and everyday social behaviour, providing moments of media and political analysis, while sustaining lively on-air conversation. Thus, coverage of urban music artist Nicki Minaj’s new single prompted a comparison between Cardi B and Minaj. K explains her preference for Cardi B: ‘I like Nicki, but I love Cardi. I just love how straight up and to the point she is’, whereas N explains why she prefers Nicki Minaj, citing her versatility: ‘She knows how to give you real street, and she knows how to give you real dance’ and C agrees, saying, ‘I love how hard working she is’. These observations demonstrate how each artist’s cultural capital and values attached to their persona resonate with young women. C’s admiration of Cardi’s being ‘straight up’ suggests her directness is a worthwhile value to emulate, while N’s preference for Minaj resides in the values of authenticity and adaptability which Minaj is seen to represent. When discussion turns to the feud between Nicki Minaj and fellow artist Cardi B, K expands on their public altercation as an example of how not to behave, connecting the incident to student standards of acceptable behaviour:
I just feel like, as professional people, they shouldn’t be doing that in public. Because . . . all of us uni students, I feel like, we’re mature, we wouldn’t sink to that level as well, especially at New York Fashion Week [NYFW] where all the main people were.

N agrees, adding,

Literally. Because girls know: they’re not allowed to fight in certain places. I’m pretty sure girls wouldn’t want to go and fight in uni, because I’m pretty sure there are certain circumstances where they can be suspended. But them doing that at NYFW! Let them have some respect for themselves!

However, K provides an explanation for Cardi B’s behaviour: ‘I feel like because she’s so new and she’s from a rough area, I would say she’s not used to having the professional standards that Nicki has had, because she’s [Nicki’s] had so many years of experience’, and C echoes the view that fighting in public is undignified and unprofessional: ‘I believe they just wanted to stand up for themselves, but it’s just not a nice thing to fight each other in public’.

Mining situated knowledges: reframing makeup practices on air

Makeup (its application, brands and perceptions of it) is a central and recurring trope in several of the radio shows produced by women students for the module, and is a topic which prompts enthusiastic discussion each time it is raised. On-air discussion of individual attitudes towards makeup use and comparisons between makeup practices comprise another layer of identity production and reflection for these presenter-producers, enabling them to negotiate societal expectations around consumption, gender and performativity through individual articulations of makeup habits and practices. Dear Uni Girls introduces a debate at the start of the second hour on the topic: ‘Do girls wear makeup [primarily] for boys?’ Interestingly, while the debate on whether women mainly wear makeup to attract romantic or sexual attention, or for their own gratification, initially establishes a heteronormative male gaze as a determining factor, ultimately attracting romantic or sexual interest does not become the focus of the discussion. Instead, the debate delves into the more complex reasons young women may choose to wear makeup, in which the three practitioners draw on their own experiences and those observed by their friends and other young women. At the beginning of the debate, C asserts that ‘I think that when girls wear makeup, they do it for themselves. From my perspective, I enjoy putting makeup on, and it’s sort of like a hobby’. She develops this further: ‘Because I’m such a makeup collector and I actually enjoy putting it on, I feel like it has nothing to do with making an impression with anybody’. K declares,

I think it’s different for every single girl . . . I feel like we have so many different types of people, because some girls come into Uni full contour, they’re doing the most, and then other girls you see are natural. So it really is down to personal preference.
N argues that makeup and the popularity of cosmetic procedures are responding to recurring images of female beauty:

Women, they follow trends that other women set . . . I feel like they're following these trends, but who are they doing it for? Because it's not what comes from their heart, it's not something that they decided, 'I want to do this'; they're going ahead copying other people because they know that's what other people like: it's 'attractive'. ‘Attractive’: the word is from ‘attract’, do you know what I mean?

B chimes in, saying ‘they’re trying to get people’s approval’. K suggests that most people ‘do things just for the Insta’, which N and C agree with, with C adding that ‘do you guys notice that a lot of girls, their Instas pretty much look the same? Because they want the same thing, they want to get the likes and everything’. Yet, alongside these agreed upon observations, C and K also suggest they wear makeup regularly to look ‘more healthy’ and ‘more ready’; that is, more prepared for the day ahead. In keeping with Dear Uni Girls’ tendency to feature songs emphasising female empowerment, the 2011 song “Scars to Your Beautiful” by Alessia Cara is played in a break in the debate, thematically reinforcing the ideas of self-acceptance being articulated in studio. Cara’s lyrics are empathetic to young women and girls’ struggle to feel attractive in the face of unrelenting media and social pressures to emulate unrealistic and unhealthy ideals, with compassionate and supportive lyrics such as, ‘So to all the girls that’s hurting/ Let me be your mirror, help you see a little bit clearer’. N unpacks the song after it finishes, reinforcing its message of self-acceptance. Earlier, K states that she uses makeup in part to alleviate her insecurities, a fear also articulated in Cara’s lyrics. The three presenter-producers bring the debate to a close by reading out comments provided earlier from students: one woman who is ‘happy with the way she looks naturally’ but fears this ‘puts guys off’, another who feels better wearing light makeup, and a male student saying he ‘prefers girls without’. The additional (and anonymous) student comments widen the parameters of the discussion by providing additional positions for listener identification on the topic, reinforcing a sense of a listening community. The segment finishes with the three practitioners drawing the following two conclusions: makeup is recognised as an industry determined by marketing discourse, yet, young girls are still drawn towards their mothers’ makeup for its creative possibilities.

N later connects young women’s perceptions of their attractiveness with the acquisition of confidence, saying, ‘I feel that girls, they feel more confident with the makeup, but they know that being confident is a trait that guys like. Guys like when girls are confident. They like to see a confident girl’. This recognition of the efficacy of ‘confidence’ as an additional factor in a woman’s attractiveness echoes Rosalind Gill’s (2017) observation of ways in which a quality such as confidence can be highjacked and reappropriated as yet another tool in an attractiveness arsenal. In her assembled analysis of the elements of gendered neoliberalism, Gill describes how ‘confidence has become an imperative in contemporary culture’ but as an individually acquired trait. Thus, a woman’s lack of confidence is ‘presented as being entirely an individual and personal matter, unconnected to structural inequalities or cultural forces. The solution, thus, becomes to work on the self, rather than change the world’ (Gill, 2017: 618). On one hand, the Dear
Uni Girls discussion and analysis of the individual value of wearing makeup functions to demystify and interrogate normative pressures to perfect makeup application. On the other hand, even as the three practitioners reflect on their makeup use, they also recognise that the attendant produced value of ‘confidence’ is itself an attractive characteristic. In this recognition, they accept a normative assumption that being attractive remains a guiding principle for young women.

In her identification of co-opted postfeminist practices, Gill (2007, 2017) has discussed how women’s choice to wear makeup can be part of a co-opted postfeminist ‘body project’ through which women’s efforts to attain an unrealistic ideal through voluntary beautification practices are reframed in narratives of self-empowerment, even as they work to embody a commodified ideal. However, I suggest that these women’s reflections on their individual makeup practices (which range from nonexistent to dedicated followers of brands and trends) transcend such postfeminist containment. Instead, as can be determined from a prevalent emphasis on ways in which makeup practices variously provide enjoyment and satisfaction in their own right, for these women practitioners, makeup practices have arguably been retrieved from such commodification. Alongside the discussion of what celebrity behaviour should be considered acceptable, the makeup discussion certainly follows recognisably normative themes. And yet, Dear Uni Girls enables practitioner articulations of their own positionality, located in celebrity and makeup culture and negotiated through their situatedness as media students – who are therefore media literate – and as young women of colour.

Enabling reflexivity through transcultural media production

Given most students’ everyday media immersion in multiple forms and platforms, a fundamental tenet of teaching cultural and media analysis is a recognition of the need for students to develop critical distance. From students’ first year onwards, many of us teaching critical media theory encourage active reflection on individual media habits and preferences as part of assessments; for example, critical reflections on personal media habits, viewing portfolios or submitting favourite music videos for in-class analysis and discussion. For media studies students, the activity of critical reflection jumpstarts a process of cognitive estrangement from their everyday media use and enables them to see their content and platform preferences from a perspective of critical distance. Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley Steinberg (1998) describe how

student researchers purpose a . . . reflective relationship to their everyday experiences, they gain the ability to explore the hidden forces that have shaped their lives . . . student researchers relearn the ways they have come to view the world around them. (p. 3)

This critical perspective then informs students’ understanding of key cultural and media studies concepts such as identity construction, performativity, positionality and subjectivity, and enable them to perceive ways in which their individual subjectivity is constructed, enabling development of what Freire (1993) terms ‘consciousness as consciousness of consciousness’ (p. 52). This, in turn, enables their conceptual
deployment in analyses of media forms which reproduce, counter or challenge normative representations of subject positions. Students are then encouraged to combine use of these concepts in critical writing with their existing (and reflected upon) individual media knowledges. By their third year at Leicester, the exercise of such cognitive estrangement is at the very least familiar and at best well developed in students, preparing them for Community Media in Practice’s emphasis on identifying ways to represent their chosen community as determined by this critical understanding of their identity and positionality. Sara Ahmed (2017) argues that theory when taught primarily as an abstract set of ideas has little relevance for students; ideas such as subjectivity construction are most fully understood at the level of personal experience. Yet, critical ideas must be understood conceptually, initially explained in language of appropriate complexity that often reads as abstract. I suggest that learning and practising cognitive estrangement enables students to connect these abstract framings of complicated concepts to their own realised, critical understanding of their everyday cultural and media practices; and to bring their complex understandings of their own affiliations, communities and diverse subjectivities to Community Radio in Practice and deploy these in their radio show production processes. Facilitating cognitive estrangement as part of teaching can additionally rework limited and limiting pedagogical infrastructures which simply reinforce normative hierarchies instead of calling these into question and to account. Drawing on Henry Giroux’s pedagogy theory, Heather McKnight (2019) argues that

Estrangement enforces a reduction of hierarchy and creation of community essential to establishing a critical pedagogy that tries to resist modes of cultural reproduction. (p. 146)

In tandem with the critique enabled by estrangement, community radio as an autonomous, local, non-profit (and therefore, often precarious) form can be usefully read as structurally estranged from UK mainstream media in general and from both commercial and public service radio (embodied here by the BBC), in particular. Community radio is consequently well placed to enable representations of otherwise estranged perspectives unheard elsewhere. Given that ‘to invoke community is immediately to raise questions of belonging and of power’, as Joseph (2002: xxiii) argues, as non-profit sites of transcultural production usually broadcasting under under-resourced conditions, community radios offer an alternative model of cultural production for media students. In the module, EAVA FM’s training begins with defining the station’s community-facing station remit and mission statement, which situates the station’s emphasis on diverse, multilingual community-led programming. Starting from community radio’s inclusive imperative firmly situates the station’s emphasis on localised, transcultural programming, providing this as the point from which the students begin planning and producing their own shows. Students have greater autonomy than they would in commercial or public service contexts and likely learn more about production, therefore, but they are also tasked with a community-facing set of responsibilities – to their identified listening community, and to EAVA FM, which is hosting their shows.

I suggest the radio shows produced through Community Radio in Practice incorporate and expand on diverse ways in which students of colour and/or students who experience marginalisation can reside and ideally flourish at university, in different self-determined
ways; surely education’s aim and project. In producing shows which reinforce community preoccupations and concerns, student practitioners embody ways in which ‘we use our particulars to challenge the universal’, as Ahmed (2017: 10) puts it. Furthermore, student practitioners invoke their situated knowledges as cultural and political resources, which can include negotiations forged from learning about ‘worlds when they do not accommodate us. Think of the kinds of experiences you have when you are not expected to be here. These experiences are a resource to generate knowledge’ (Ahmed, 2017: 10). Ahmed’s expansion of the use value of such experiences aptly describes how these can feed into on-air knowledges which are community-specific. In producing their shows, student voices, including BAME voices, are amplified across broadcast and online media, countering ongoing dominance of Whiteness in mainstream media and institutional contexts. Calling for a ‘structural critique of the persistence of whiteness in our field [of media studies]’, Lisa Henderson (2020) argues that given that persistence, ‘a shift in racial voice is essential, as a wake-up call, a critique, and an expression of politically conscious frustration. That is the very least that is required from and for media studies’ (p. 584).

In producing collectively produced, community-facing content, these student-produced shows are innately reflexive, speaking from their own shared, as well as disparate, experiences to a self-determined community of listeners. Through deploying these communicative practices, the radio shows (in different ways) embody Berlant’s observation that ‘an intimate public is a space of mediation in which the personal is refracted through the general’; comprising a collectively produced affective space of emotional contact. By identifying this function as a produced yet embodied way of ‘being in the world’, she proposes that

an intimate public is an achievement . . . Whether linked to women or other nondominant people, it flourishes as a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an x. (Berlant, 2008: viii)

Or, given the structural imperative making multiple points of identification available in these collectively produced shows, discussion of and explorations into knowing and being from various ‘x’ positionalities. Students consider and mine their experiences and knowledges for programme content from a critically distanced perspective so as to repurpose these knowledges and reassert elements of their own subjectivity which infuse them. Following their show broadcasts, the individual critical reflection (the final module assessment) requires that students reflect on and consider their production practices prior to broadcast and contrast this with what they learned during the show’s broadcast itself. This assessment’s emphasis on reflexivity enables students to critically consider (as far as they feel comfortable) how their own subject positioning has informed programme production and content. As Carol Stabile (2011) argues, ‘In terms of scholarship, self-reflexivity involves the ability to consider the construction of one’s object of study [oneself, or elements of oneself]’, in part to ‘avoid preconstructions that comes with a state guarantee’ (p. 24). I argue that the emphasis on production practice and on ongoing collective work with other students facilitates pedagogical conditions for recognition of such state-formed
preconstructions, not least in the reproduction of each practitioner’s own cultural imaginary as it informs each collectively produced community-facing programme. At the same time, the discussions and debates in each show elide and bypass a neoliberal university project commodifying and instrumentalising ‘difference’ for visual dissemination in online prospectuses and other marketing materials. In this elision, these community media interventions, to use Dreher’s term (2010), work to counter and challenge the expectations which beset and stunt inclusion initiatives, reinforcing Stuart Hall’s (1997) recognition of how the burden of representation shapes contexts, in which the optics of equitable representation continue to replace representative accountability. By foregrounding learning the means of (radio) production, the module and shows produced move students beyond analyses of representation while reinforcing understandings of a media environment populated by a multiplicity of community media; in this way, these shows embody Dreher’s project of community media as interventions.

I suggest here that the diversity of community articulations enabled by the capacities of a 2-hour programme slot (allowing for expanded discussion and debate) and by host station EAVA FM’s overarching remit of inclusivity, in turn, facilitates the creation of affective publics through processes of community reproduction within these student-produced shows. Harvey (2001) and Joseph (2002) have (separately) recognised ways in which the ongoing integrity of community identity is reproduced and reinforced through a series of continuous processes, in which the identity(-ies) informing the community’s components is repeatedly being refined and updated. Each show reinforces its community of listeners through inclusive strategies such as familiar and relatable cultural coverage and music; debate topics relevant to the community, and through combining two or three voices on air to produce diverse points of possible identification for listeners. These strategies coalesce in discursive practices based on situated and diverse knowledges, which function to reproduce and reinforce each show’s self-selected community.

**Conclusion: expanding student agency through the radio voice**

In the class following each group’s show broadcast, I ask members of the group to reflect on any differences between their expectations of how the show would go and how they felt the show went in practice. In their responses (and always on the day of broadcast itself), students discuss their emotional reactions – usually excitement and nervousness on arrival at the studio, which then give way to enjoyment and pride and relief – and cite these as inherent to their overall experience. To further encourage students to critically unpack their reflections, I ask if they felt they developed a ‘radio voice’ when speaking live on air. Regular radio listeners will be familiar with the ‘professional’ broadcast voice, often characterised by a smooth delivery, modulated to be clear and not too fast or slow. Styles differ between public service broadcasting and commercial formats, which generally provide training to their presenters. This professionalised understanding further resonates for media students who seek careers involving some presenting; students may produce short videos as part of the Media and Communication degree so are already aware of modes of professional presentation to camera (and in addition, several students
have developed YouTube content in which these skills are incorporated). The question, encouraging reflection on individual development of a radio voice (consciously or not), enables recognition of the value of voice and opens space for analysis and discussion of how this value can be understood across several registers. This recognition can be powerful and even visceral as how we feel about our voice is often deeply personal, not least because our voice can function as an immediate signifier of our social and political situatedness. I ask students to consider ‘voice’ aesthetically as a way of performing identity; if they believe they have a distinct ‘radio voice’, what is this comprised of? Accent, mode of delivery, uses of vocabulary, slang, and so on? If they develop a distinct radio voice, consciously or unconsciously, what renders this as different from their everyday speaking voice, and why did they invoke this new voice when on air? To prepare for and situate these post-show reflections, early in the module, I discuss ways in which community radio can unseat and challenge existing hierarchies of voice to provide context and expand on their reflections. Some moments in reflective discussions on voice, particularly from BAME students, recall bell hooks’ (1989) description of ways in which

[i]ndividuals who speak languages other than English, who speak patois as well as standard English, find it a necessary aspect of self-affirmation not to feel compelled to choose one voice over another, not to claim one as more authentic, but rather to construct social realities that celebrate, acknowledge and affirm differences, variety. (p. 12)

Students’ diverse on-air deployments of voice can enable agency through confidence in speaking on a show they produced themselves. In turn, this mode of ‘[s]peaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject’. In the neoliberal university where top-down diversity initiatives can showcase difference rather than supporting fully inhabited or voiced diversity of experiences, this ‘coming to voice’ can be ‘an act of resistance’ (hooks, 1989: 12). When this coming to voice is collective and incorporated in processes of production, there is greater scope for student recognition of its value for individual agency. Reflecting on collective knowledge production in another undergraduate module, former student Taylor Hiner describes the value of collaboration with classmates and community members as being able to see ‘the lines of differences between people start to blur’. They add that ‘more knowledge about difference is crucial to articulate and produce knowledge that is inclusive and vivid in its representation’ (Shayne et al., 2016: 61).

In this article, I have sought to identify some ways in which pedagogical strategies of collective community-led production and critical estrangement can be deployed to persuade students of the critical value of reflection and praxis, which can be carried forward into students’ ongoing negotiations of ways in which they experience (intersecting, contradictory) elements of their positionality into their future. In doing so, I attempt to incorporate my critical pedagogic practice into a cultural studies project which recognises ways in which problem-led learning can be deployed in expanding critical reflexivity in students through diverse forms of cultural and knowledge production. I have also attempted to identify and explore possibilities located in affective publics formed by community-facing radio shows and their (actual and implied) listening communities for negotiating diverse elements of under-represented subjectivities, and diverse experiences of discrimination, marginalisation and precarity, in particular. As actual structures
of care provided by the neoliberal university, in particular, and the United Kingdom in general continue to be eroded, an erosion accelerated in the context of COVID-19, responsibility for affective life is placed increasingly on the under-resourced individual. In this context, community-produced radio (whether locally produced or streamed internationally) provides a wider and more nuanced range of spaces for identity and experiential articulations which listeners seeking community familiarity can relate to – and also facilitates opportunities for modes of community self-representation for students and young people which more closely reflect and represent the realities of their everyday life.

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ORCID iD

Katie Moylan https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9205-2566

Notes

1. See David Buckingham’s discussion of the current ‘evasion of education’ and call for its retrieval in cultural studies, https://davidbuckingham.net/2020/02/08/cultural-studies-and-the-evasion-of-education/ (accessed 25 January 2021).
2. See also the Cultural Studies MA programme at the University of Washington-Bothell, which foregrounds production of portfolios as ‘a self-curated collection’ of student work situating their research in Cultural Studies alongside capstone research projects which require students to engage with a particular critical question in-depth; see https://www.uwb.edu/cultural-studies/curriculum/capstone-guidelines (accessed 2 February 2021). Many thanks to reviewer 2 for bringing this programme to my attention.
3. UK universities condemned for failure to tackle racism, 5 July 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/jul/05/uk-universities-condemned-for-failure-to-tackle-racism (accessed 8 July 2019).
4. UNESCO et al. (2001).
5. Using a ‘first come, first served’ approach remains imperfect as – despite advance emails announcing all module options – students may find out about the module at different times, then try to sign up only to find the module is full. However, this still seems to be the most equitable approach; having a grade requirement would elide those occasions when students who otherwise are not flourishing in more traditional academic assessment, nonetheless find themselves more fully engaged with the production-led approach and/or greater autonomy enabled by production-led assessments.
6. On-air student contributions referenced throughout this article are anonymised, with each student described only by an initial, which does not correspond to their given names.
7. ‘Run the World (Girls)’ is from the album 4, released in 2011 by Beyoncé Knowles.
8. ‘Doo-Wop (That Thing)’ is from Lauryn Hill’s album The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill, released in 1998.
9. ‘Doo-Wop (That Thing)’ is from Lauryn Hill’s album The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill, released in 1998.

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**Biographical note**

*Katie Moylan* is an associate professor in Media at the University of Leicester, UK, and EU/Marie Curie Global Research Fellow (2019–2021) researching Indigenous community radio programming, production and structures. Her research areas incorporate community radio, Indigenous critical theory and televisual aesthetics and critique.