

Article

# Idealistic Assertions or Realistic Possibilities in Community and Youth Work Education

Sinéad Gormally <sup>1,\*</sup> , Annette Coburn <sup>2</sup>  and Edward Beggan <sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup> School of Education, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G3 6NH, UK; edward.beggan@glasgow.ac.uk<sup>2</sup> School of Education and Social Sciences, University of West of Scotland, Glasgow G72 0LH, UK; annette.coburn@uws.ac.uk

\* Correspondence: Sinead.gormally@glasgow.ac.uk

**Abstract:** Community and youth work (CYW) practice has been articulated as striving towards a more socially just and equal society and is theorised as a catalyst for social change that seeks to overcome power differentials. Yet, despite these claims, there is limited empirical evidence to inform knowledge about the extent to which ‘equality work’ is featured and practiced in CYW programmes in higher education. This article draws on perspectives from current and former CYW students in the UK which routinely claim critical pedagogy as the bedrock of professionally approved degree programmes. Utilising a survey approach, our aim was to examine the experiences of students to find out if teaching, learning and assessment practices in professionally approved CYW programmes can be argued as helping students to articulate practice as emancipatory. The findings indicate that there was coherence and a strong understanding of core theories that confirmed CYW programmes as helping students to articulate emancipatory practice. In relation to teaching and learning, programmes were not as aligned with critical pedagogy, inclining more towards traditional and formal methods than alternative or informal methods. Finally, an imbalance between the persistent use of standardised assessment methods over more flexible and creative assessments suggested a reluctance to seek, or develop, more emancipatory sustainable assessment alternatives. The article concludes by arguing that informal education and, specifically, CYW programmes are well-placed to drive institutional and social change forward.

**Keywords:** critical pedagogy; community and youth work; constructive alignment; social justice; equality



**Citation:** Gormally, S.; Coburn, A.; Beggan, E. Idealistic Assertions or Realistic Possibilities in Community and Youth Work Education. *Educ. Sci.* **2021**, *11*, 561. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11090561>

Academic Editors: Pam Alldred and Frances Howard

Received: 9 June 2021

Accepted: 16 September 2021

Published: 18 September 2021

**Publisher’s Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2021 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

In line with the contemporary literature [1–5], we have identified community and youth work (CYW) as a critical and optimistic practice for ‘people and practitioners to work together in order to achieve the kind of social change that is needed for improved equality and social justice’ ([6], p. 172). Yet, there is a gap in understanding the extent to which ‘equality work’ is practiced, and authenticated, in higher education (HE) professional degree programmes that espouse critical pedagogy [7,8] as a bedrock of practice. Building on Biggs’ [9] conceptualisation of constructive alignment, and the idea of sustainable assessment as learning for the longer term [10], we question whether practices within higher education embody social justice values and principles. Our research sought to understand how working at the interface between formal and informal education, could help to create knowledge and develop more sustainable teaching, learning and assessment practices in HE. This offered scope to consider more widespread use of alternative methods to bring learning, teaching and assessment practice into constructive alignment with our theorising and teaching of critical pedagogy for social justice [6,11,12].

Antonovsky’s [13] work on salutogenesis sought to understand what makes a good healthy life possible and reminded us of what we truly value: spending time with family and friends, and having a sense of community, coherence and freedom. As university

lecturers, taking time to pause and reflect on our practice, we are able to re-theorise our world and assess if higher education (HE) contributes positively to society. This article considers the impact of HE values and approaches to learning that are pertinent to providing students with a positive educational experience.

CYW degree programmes are designed to facilitate student learning that is aligned with informal education with a clear democratic purpose. Critical pedagogy is portrayed as key to professional learning and is noted as offering an alternative to neoliberal frames that seek to regulate, reduce and standardise students' university experience. According to Taberner [14], the student experience has become fragmented and reduced to marketable outcomes, rather than advancing democracy. Yet, the application of critical pedagogy [15] offers a transformative learning process [16] that aims to help non-traditional students gain a professionally approved degree qualification, whilst becoming an emancipatory practitioner. Such programmes are required to meet both internal institutional scrutiny and external professional approval. This involves negotiation across educational boundaries, in order to mitigate distinctions in the expectations of formal education requirements at HE level and in the expectations of informal education methodologies as the focus of CYW practice. While joint validation processes appear coherent in facilitating synthesis to complete programme approval, this article examines student perspectives that show the extent to which this coherence persists across qualifying programmes, where their specific focus for qualification is located in their professional roles as informal educators in CYW contexts.

This article also examines current contexts in higher education and professional CYW practices. It explains our research methodology and results that offer insights into student experiences of studying CYW. The discussion considers the extent to which CYW students' experiences were constructively aligned with institutional and professional community practices [9]. This helped us to draw conclusions on how learning, teaching and assessment in HE are aligned with critical pedagogy in helping students to articulate their practice and its emancipatory purpose.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Knowledge was created from a constructo-interpretive epistemological standpoint [17] as a means of interpreting how students come to know and understand their HE experiences. Our ontological position was grounded in the equality of capabilities and conditions [18] to understand how student perceptions were aligned or at odds with assertions of CYW lecturers in HE. Thus, our aim was to undertake a survey of teaching, learning and assessment practices in CYW programmes to consider the veracity of these assertions. Holding a mirror up to HE practice, we expected this survey to inform understanding of the complexities and challenges we face in crossing practice boundaries as informal educators within formal educational contexts.

Data were collected through an online questionnaire (via Microsoft Forms, MF). This offered a rich dataset of evidence that underpinned this article. The questionnaire asked a mixture of closed and open questions. This provided quantitative data that were analysed to produce numeric percentage calculations (generated by MF) and open questions that were analysed to produce qualitative themes, which were generated by an inductive thematic coding process to produce robust and trustworthy results. This involved using highlighter pens to code raw data, which were then grouped together to create themes [19], which enabled us to make sense of participant ideas rather than introducing existing theories or pre-established codes.

Participants were recruited through open invitation distributed via social media, relevant professional bodies and CYW higher education institutions. An open 'link' to access the questionnaire was circulated and posted on social media, which meant that our sample was opportunistic, comprising those who were able to access the link. This process gained 136 responses from graduates (112) and current (24) students on CYW HE programmes. Of the 136 participants, 128 completed a professionally approved programme,

3 completed a non-qualifying programme and 5 were unsure of their programme status. The majority of respondents (73) graduated between 2011 and 2020, while 27 respondents graduated between 2001 and 2010, 11 between 1991 and 2000, 2 between 1981 and 1990, and 1 graduated pre-1981.

The geographical split was UK-based, with only 1 participant from Zambia, who was studying with a UK institution. Despite seeking to recruit a broad range of participants, of the 135 in the UK, 86 were from Scotland, 22 were from England, 22 were from Northern Ireland and 5 were from Wales. The higher rate of Scottish students most likely reflects the fact that all three researchers are from Scottish higher education institutions. Despite this, we argue that so long as participants were studying or had studied CYW at this level, their perspectives were important within a whole country (UK) view, but not geographically representative of each of the four discrete parts of the UK. Our focus was on their headline experiences of learning, teaching and assessment, rather than being overly concerned about the distinctions in devolved governments and funding councils across all four UK nations. We may consider whether these distinctions are important in creating a more nuanced interpretation of praxis, but for now, our findings were analysed at the UK level. Further, as the focus of our research was grounded in CYW programmes as a practice cohort, we did not collect data on specific identifiers such as age or ethnicity. We believed that specific sociodemographic profiling was not applicable to this research, as our focus was on students' experiences in higher education on the CYW programmes without breaking into routine demographics.

Ethical approval for this project was gained from The University of the West of Scotland ethics committee. Questionnaires were fully anonymised, with no names, identifying features, or locations collected. Consent information was communicated in the introduction section of the questionnaire, and taken as given by submitting the form. Only the researchers had access to the results via the MS Forms responses table. All electronic files and documents related to the research were stored on password-protected computers, and any paper documents were securely stored in a locked location. There were no potentially or obviously upsetting questions, and as the subject of this research was their experiences of a programme that they were not responsible for, the risk of being harmed was mitigated.

### 3. Results

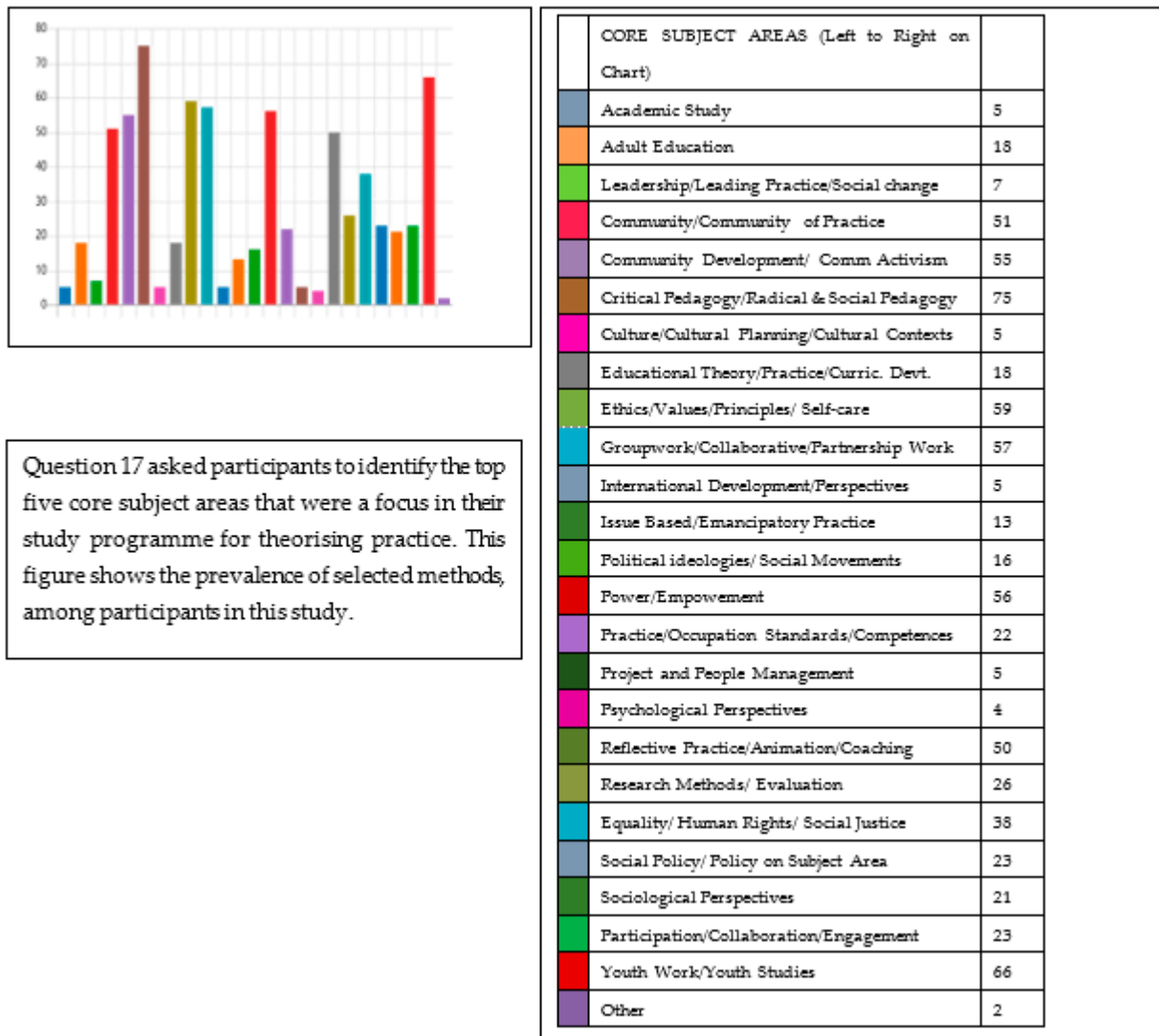
The results for this paper are centred on three areas. The first relates to the understanding of theories that underpinned CYW programmes, questioning whether they align to emancipatory practice. The second is the alignment of teaching and learning with critical pedagogy to create powerful and professionally relevant learning, and the third is analysing assessment methods in professional development, questioning the role of traditional and sustainable approaches as learning for the longer term.

Figure 1 shows that the core selected subject area was 'critical/radical pedagogy and social pedagogy' (75 respondents). This was closely followed by youth work/youth studies (66), ethics/values/self-care (59), groupwork/collaborative and partnership working (57), power and empowerment (56) and community development/activism (55).

As shown in Figure 1, this indicated that the theoretical focus of CYW programmes was aligned with non-traditional pedagogical ideas that were driven by critical or radical theories that were prioritised over more traditional theories. To see these areas of critical, radical and social pedagogy at the forefront of degree programmes that routinely claim this area of educational expertise was heartening.

Building on such theories, it was unsurprising that values and group work or working collaboratively and in partnerships were key subject areas in theorising practice that works across professional boundaries and in a range of contexts. The focus on youth work and youth studies as key was also unsurprising, given that many HE programmes across the UK have an explicit 'youth' focus. The slightly lesser focus on community development/activism may demonstrate that whilst youth work is a central focus for many programmes across the UK, theorising community development principles, community

activism and questioning what community is and how community is differently theorised remain important areas for study in CYW programmes. Unpacking the way in which these key subject areas were explored in CYW programmes is vital in understanding how students translated theory into practice and vice versa.



**Figure 1.** Student perspectives on theorising emancipatory practice.

### 3.1. Critical Pedagogy

Freire [20] advocated for education to be reflective of societal issues. It was therefore affirming to see critical pedagogy as a focus for theorising practice in CYW programmes:

*‘Critical pedagogy was a huge influence . . . [it] . . . really changed my thinking . . . how I seen power dynamics . . . I became much more critically aware’.* (Participant 6)

When asked about theories that opened their minds to new ideas, 25 participants specifically noted Freire’s work, which was summed up by one participant as ‘Genius’, while another stated that ‘Freire blew my mind’ (participant 29). Critical pedagogy was useful in shaping students’ thinking specifically in relation to education and educational institutions,

*‘Critical pedagogy in particular was an important aspect . . . it helped my understanding education, and power relations. This helped me reframe my understanding and emotional relationship to education and learning’.* (Participant 99)

Two participants explicitly connected theory in critical pedagogy to emancipatory practice which challenges injustices,

*'It's recognising rights ... Who has them and who doesn't. Who's excluded and why? What kind of world do we want and how nurturing it is'.* (Participant 58)

This form of 'transformative praxis' [21] was key for students' capacity to see direct relevance in a theory they engaged with, and putting it into action:

*'Studying Freire ... was incredibly useful on a theoretical level that can be very directly applied into practice. The emphasis on trying to help people to see their contexts in a new way has helped me also open doors to new possibilities in my work and my own learning ... the emphasis on seeing ... overlapping oppressions and dehumanizing systems, helped me put in more concrete terms what I had been feeling about the world through years of working internationally'.* (Participant 83)

That students have identified critical pedagogy as a core theoretical positioning on CYW programmes demonstrates the capacity to adopt critical pedagogies in formal HE institutions. Critical pedagogy focusses on the interplay between power and knowledge [22], which participants also noted.

### 3.2. Power/Empowerment

Fifty-six respondents specifically discussed power and empowerment.

*'Paulo Friere and Saul Alinsky opened up my thinking ... It's about the ideas of knowledge and power and the acknowledgement of how these are essential in everyday life'.* (Participant 58)

Another participant noted uncomfortableness in reflecting on power differentials but subsequently had a positive impact,

*'Power and Empowerment stood out I felt really uncomfortable at the time doing the activities ... it pushed me out of my comfort zone ... It irks me to hear colleagues from across the partnership say they 'empower' communities. I believe that we could all do more in this area'.* (Participant 116)

Highlighting key theories on power and the importance of language, the challenging of tokenistic inclusion and dialectical teaching [23] were articulated as key lessons for CYW lecturers involved in educating informal educators.

### 3.3. Ethics and Values

Explicit links between theories attached to ethics, standards, benchmarks and the capacity to be a good practitioner were noted,

*'Some of these subjects were about shaping what kind of ... [practitioner] ... we would be and our values—empathy, believing in and understanding equality, ensuring that young people know their rights'.* (Participant 54)

Participants clearly aligned areas of critical pedagogy, power and CYW practice. Additionally, the theorising of ethics, values, and self-care was also important,

*'Our ethics and values were drilled into us... Most CLD practitioners know these off by heart and I think that is important as it should underpin all work and always be our starting point'.* (Participant 11)

The fact that CYW is explicitly a value-driven profession [24,25] may explain why ethics/values and self-care featured so prominently. For others, this process facilitated a thinking of the world they wanted and the type of practitioner they would be,

*'... working in an emancipatory way for social justice and built on CLD ethics and values'.* (Participant 87)

*'... exploring ethics and values to allow yourself to see how you are coming across to others'.* (Participant 31)



The highlighting of the key subject areas on CYW programmes provides some headlines that are important for our community of practice. It is positive that students articulate critical pedagogy as a key focus of our programmes and demonstrates that theoretically, at least, our degree programmes do align with a view of the world which we strive for. However, despite this theoretical positioning, student responses on teaching and learning did not align so strongly with critical pedagogy.

#### *3.4. Student Perspectives on: Alignment in Teaching and Learning*

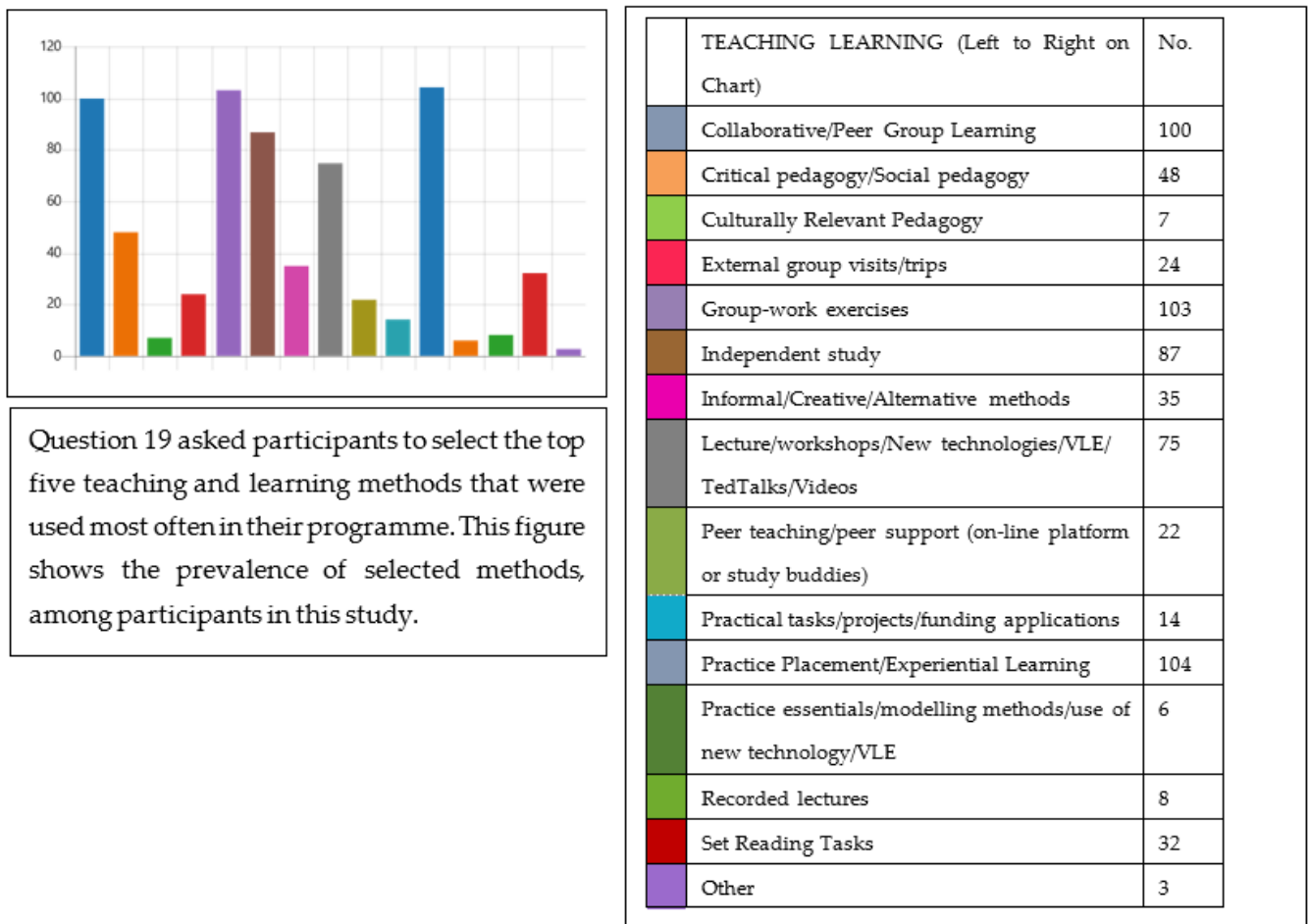
Martin [26] posited that within the neo-liberal environment that currently permeates the educational system, a lack of programmes offering students the opportunity to engage in alternative ways of learning and thinking is troubling. As CYW educators within higher education, we feel that it is imperative that a variety of teaching and learning methods are implemented as a means to creating an equally viable education journey for the varied skill sets of students. Lynch and Baker [27] identified a need for equality of conditions within education and rather than social processes being the same for everyone, this is “about equalizing what might be called people’s ‘real options’, which involves the equal enabling and empowerment of individuals” (p. 132).

From personal experience, we acknowledge that our pedagogy and practice reflect a blended or hybrid approach that uses a mix of face-to-face teaching, synchronous online engagements and asynchronous online engagements. We align our practice and pedagogy with CYW values to developing an informal and socially constructed and trusting relationship with students [23,28,29]. This is not simply about achieving a minimum level of learning, knowledge and understanding required to graduate, but is explicitly connected to the development of ongoing learning, continuous reflection and professional development within and beyond the programme.

From this perspective, it was important to gain a deeper understanding of how students are engaging with the different teaching and learning methods that are offered on the CYW programmes.

Above, Figure 2, shows the response from participants regarding teaching and learning methods on the programmes they attended. These were interesting, in that it came as no surprise that the top three picks were practice/placement (104), group work exercises (103) and collaborative/peer group learning (100). These were fairly typical expectations for a practice-based programme, which showed that the programmes the research participants engaged with offered a pedagogically sound learning experience, indicative of the field of practice. Exposing students of CYW programmes to community-based work in practice seem obvious as a teaching method in this field, where Jakubowski and Burman [30] stated that ‘[t]here are many reasons pedagogically for bringing classroom and community together’ (p. 165), where students have an opportunity to develop ongoing relationships with community members over time.

However, it was interesting to note, that other choices featured in the middle ground. Methods such as critical pedagogy/social pedagogy (48), informal/creative/alternative methods (35) and peer teaching/peer support (22) were less frequently selected. This suggested that while some programmes clearly offered these options, they did not do so as often as those in the top three picks. This is noteworthy to the extent that we routinely see ourselves as advocates of alternative, informal methods in practice, yet this evidence suggests that practices within higher education may not be modelling these methods.



**Figure 2.** Five methods for teaching and learning that were most often used in your degree programme.

### 3.5. Powerful Learning Environments

Being advocates for alternative methods in teaching and learning is not without complexity. Combining alternative informal methods with the more traditional formal notions of education requires creative thinking. Steffes [31] considered alternative approaches and made reference to ‘powerful learning environments’ for students which incorporate a ‘view of learning that integrates their real world experiences with classroom lectures and discussion’ (p. 49).

There were some interesting responses from participants to suggest that a broad range of learning was (and still is) happening.

*‘The methods employed ensured total immersion in the subjects and a critical understanding of our place and views- personally and professionally in relation to everything’.* (Participant 32)

*‘These areas helped my learning because it was a multi-faceted approach, covering a range of learning styles and scenarios, from reading assignments, to personal study to peer group work, this allowed me not only the time and space to form my own conclusions about the work and topics, but when working with peers it allowed me to see and discuss the similarities or differences between our approaches and mindsets allowing me to take those into consideration, improving my overall practice’.* (Participant 37)

*‘I found it difficult to understand the creative methods of assessment in an academic course but it actually worked to ensure everyone had the chance to showcase their learning styles. The placements are where most learning takes place for me’.* (Participant 63)

*'A good mixed variety was used which pushed students out of comfort zones at times which would happen in the workplace so readied me for that again after years away from the field; new ideas and theories from workshops and reading from recommended reading lists or watching suggested videos etc stretched my mind and offered more knowledge and insights into topics and areas I had none or little in. More class time was what I and most fellow classmates said we would have liked more of. Sometimes group work was a hindrance when other group members would or could not make themselves available to meet and work together leaving others carrying them or when personalities clashed too much'. (Participant 87)*

These responses provided insight into how participants felt about the teaching and learning methods in the programmes attended. The above comments show the importance of the variety in methods used as a means to create critical understanding, accommodate different learning styles, facilitate peer learning and dealing with situations that require negotiation and compromise.

However, the results do suggest that there is a heavy reliance on the top three picks, and without these, the programmes would suffer. Modules such as practice placement are vital to the learning experience on CYW practice-based programmes, which is also common-place in most higher education programmes [32–34]. So, if we are to hold a mirror up to our own practice as critical pedagogues, and practice what we preach, we have to find a way of pushing through the other alternative methods that we argue to be so valuable. The difficulty lies in how that might be implemented.

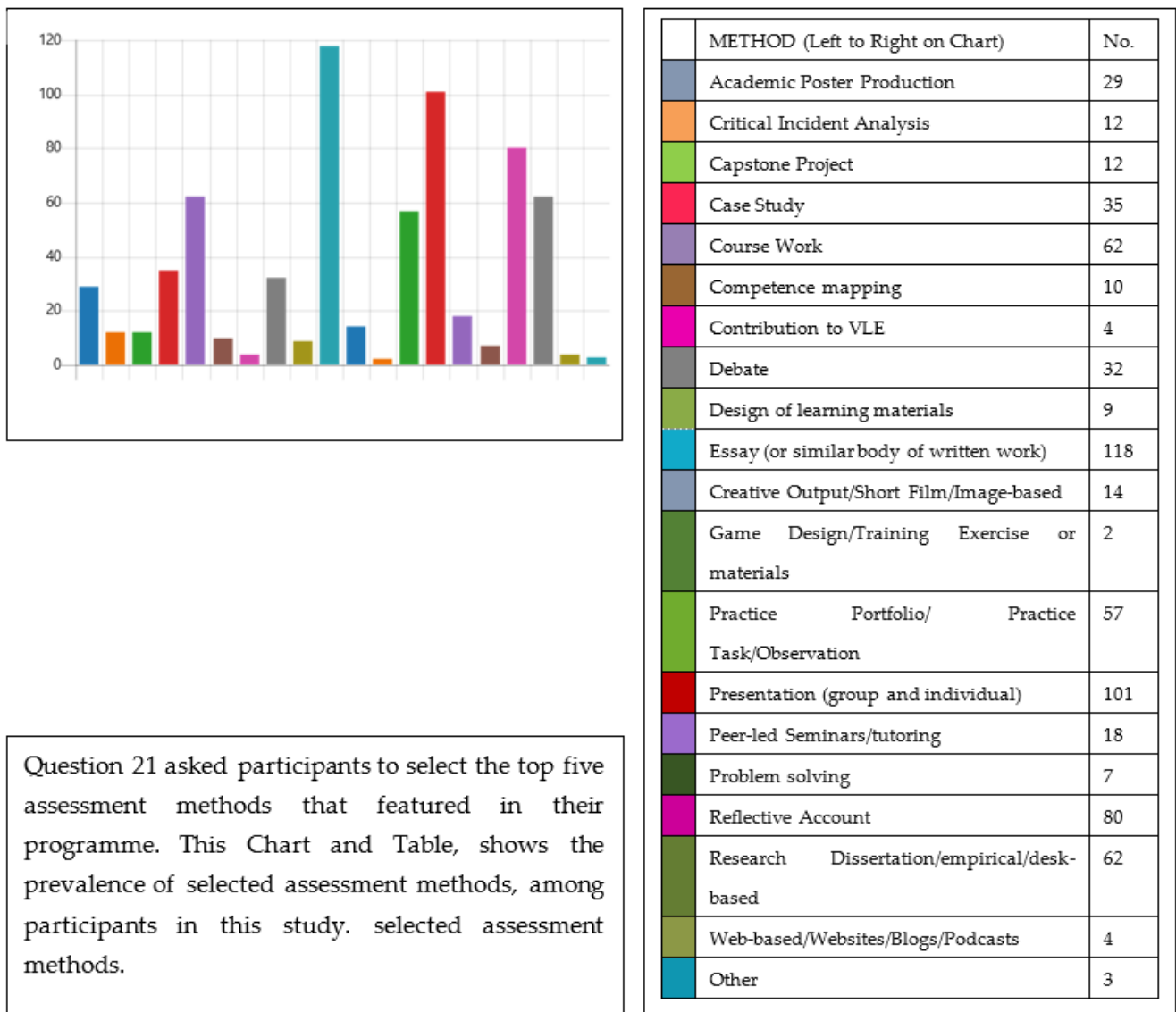
### 3.6. Student Perspectives on: Assessment as Learning for Now, and the Longer Term

Traditionally, assessment practices were engineered to ensure congruence between instruction and alignment with the curriculum [9]. Formative feedback was provided to improve and guide learning, and summative feedback was given at the end of the learning process to determine grades or award credit on the summation of the student's work [9,35]. Advances in formative assessment have accelerated learning, optimised the quality of learning, and have also raised individual and collective attainment [36,37]. However, Boud and Falchicov [38] noted that higher education assessment practices had not reflected a need for students to develop learning for the longer term.

The findings in Figure 3, show that essay (118 respondents), presentation (101) and reflective accounts (80) were selected as most prevalent, followed by research dissertation (62), course work (62), and practice portfolio (57), which included practice-based tasks and practice observation. The middle-ground assessment methods comprised case study (35), debate (32), academic posters (29), and peer-led seminars (18). Finally, the less frequently selected assessment methods included creative output (14), which included short film- and image-based methods, a capstone project (12) and critical incident analysis (12), game design/training exercises (9), designing learning materials (9), problem solving (7), contribution to the VLE (4), and web-based assessment (4), which included website development/blogs and podcasts.

When asked if assessments did more than simply help to achieve a particular grade, 87% said yes, and typically offered short answers on predictable areas of added value, such as: prompting critical or deeper thinking; creating or consolidating knowledge; and developing understanding of a specific subject area. Typical responses from the remaining 13% who answered 'no' included because the assessment was fit for purpose in achieving a pass grade or was viewed as a 'tick-box exercise', 'the questions had not been changed for years', or 'they were a means to an end'—these answers were indicative of traditional associations with assessment in awarding credit as an immediate or short-term means of grading student work.





**Figure 3.** The top 5 assessment methods featured in your programme.

Routinely, written work underpinned all or most student grades, due to the exclusion of other forms of assessment. While all written assessments were graded, formative assessments or coursework were viewed as facilitating feedback that was not graded. This privileging of written essay-type assessments was assumed, rather than considering alternative methods, for example:

*'I don't really understand this question? Other than the e-portfolio, all of my assessments were written'. (Participant 108)*

*'It was a distance learning programme and the assessments were written'. (Participant 91)*

In not being familiar with alternative assessment methods, participant 108 did not understand the question, and participant 91 believed that a distance learning programme, by design, necessitated written assessments. Yet, where more creative and varied assessment methods were available, participants noted:

*'Critical pedagogy module was in the format of showing it ... [Critical Pedagogy] ... in use by an assessment that involved us ... [students] ... in teaching the class and in facilitating learning'. (Participant 79)*

*'While written work was required at times, there were assessments to be completed in the form of presentations, debates, posters and games'. (Participant 71)*

*'I felt just as scrutinised during other means of assessments and got just as critical feedback compared with written work'. (Participant 35)*

These comments show why 41% believed that written work was not privileged over other forms of assessment. Responding to questions on assessment methods, the findings show balance, in that essays and written assessments were beneficial in grading and requirements for formal reporting, while creative or alternative methods were beneficial in widening student learning and enhancing capacity for different intelligences to shine. Thus, the findings clarify that assessment methods were varied and could be used or adapted for assessment and learning beyond the immediate purposes of academic credit [35,38], which included aspects of professional development.

The prevalence in the selected methods gave a total of 671 responses. It is concerning that 71% of this total showed persistence in the use of traditional formal methods comprising written essays, dissertations, presentations and reflective accounts, while 18% of responses showed middle-ground assessments comprising case study, debate, academic posters and peer-led seminars and 11% of respondents selected methods, such as web-based assessment, creative outputs, capstone projects or learning design. This imbalance suggests that assessment practice in HE was inconsistent with critical pedagogy.

#### 4. Discussion

CYW practitioners in the UK work with the most excluded and vulnerable in society, many of whom have borne the brunt of austerity measures and the negative impacts of COVID-19, which intensified levels of poverty and human suffering. Austerity measures were described as 'a harsh and uncaring ethos' by Alston [39] who, as UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, also noted a 're-discovery of social protection in a global pandemic' [40] (p. 5). Yet, Alston [40] asserted the need for longer term social change where, 'economic recovery...contributes to poverty eradication and the reduction of inequalities' (p. 21). This connects directly to our HE role in teaching informal educators, as preparation for a career in striving for equality and social and structural change within CYW.

This aligns with perspectives that emphasise a role of higher education Institutions (HEIs) as a catalyst for social change, whereby:

*'Community—university engagement . . . [creates] . . . a two-way discourse that engages the community and the students to produce socially relevant contemporary knowledge based on active participation . . . to make the world a better place to live'. ([41], p. 4)*

This discourse on civil society and social responsibility in higher education is consistent with CYW practices, in our aspirations for professional learning in which critical pedagogy connects to both community development and the emancipatory educational purpose that:

*' . . . relates to a wider conception of education that connects matters of politics and to matters of powerful learning within and beyond the institutions . . . [that] . . . explicitly encourages . . . boundary crossing in which community and institutional values coalesce'. ([12], pp. 143–144)*

While much has been written about the influence of critical pedagogy on formal and informal educational practices [8,15,42], there was a gap in the understanding of CYW student perspectives on whether this knowledge was influential in changing and authenticating practices in HEIs across the UK.

These research results provide robust evidence that, in preparing students for professional practice, CYW students are provided with a solid grounding in theoretical perspectives that are aligned with emancipatory praxis. Helping students to understand critical theory was articulated by students as transformative in facilitating a deep understanding of why CYW practice is important.

The prevalence of critical, radical and social pedagogy, and the analysis of power in theorising practice, was aligned with results that established grassroots practice-based learning and group or peer learning as the most highly selected methods for teaching and learning. This confirmed our expectations for professional grassroots practice that resides in a conceptualisation of critical pedagogy where education is proposed as the practice of freedom [7,8]. In critical pedagogy, education is understood as praxis, where a fusion of theory with practice engages people in 'action and reflection upon the world in order to change it' ([43], p. 206). Aligning critical theory with a strong focus on the practical application of alternative and creative teaching methods was shown by students as key to facilitating social change. Thus, the findings are consistent with Biggs' [9] ideas on constructive alignment, as the results are directly aligned with professional competences for working with people to enable them to engage in learning and to take action that brings change for themselves and their communities [44].

Furthermore, according to Lynch [45], who raised concerns about education as 'being incorporated into the market as an instrument of capitalism and profiteering' (p. viii), there is a requirement for resistance, as a moral imperative, against social and educational injustice. Our findings show that being grounded in ethical practice values and powerful learning environments was useful in creating authentically aligned teaching and learning methods in CYW programmes. These were different from traditional educational theories and methods and thus, we suggest, enacted the kind of resistance called for by Lynch [45]. Yet, evolving circumstances emphasise a need to challenge the marketisation and individualisation of education, in order to emerge from it in a world where all people, not only those who can afford it, have an increased chance of making a good life within a fairer economy that is driven not only by the market but also by well-being [46].

As the first whole-country empirical research of student perspectives specifically on their experiences of CYW programmes, this research adds to the work of Seal [42] to assert that across the UK, HEIs are already engaged in practice that is resistant to traditional theories and methods in education. This suggests that in educating informal educators, alternative, critical and radical theories and a range of teaching and learning methods are routinely, and in some instances strongly, applied in CYW programmes. Yet, this constructive alignment in teaching theory and modelling practice was not so obvious in assessment practices. Here, there was less evidence of alternative or sustainable practices. Despite results that show that some HEIs did use assessments that were constructively aligned [9] to professional roles and values, by utilising a full range of assessment methods, this was often not the case.

The imbalance of formal and traditional assessments, compared to the use of innovative, technologically, or varying from written assessments, was at odds with critical pedagogy and CYW values for emancipatory practice. The utility and scope for aligning assessment practices in HE resides in the evolution of alternative assessment methods that can assist in developing student dispositions as lifelong learners and as assessors of their own and others' learning [10,47,48]. Increasing creative and technological methods for face-to face and web-based assessment needs further consideration in the evolution of assessment in HE, as part of the wider contribution of a civic university.

Rather than simply measuring progress within the curriculum, as a means of grading coursework, assessment has been proposed as a means of 'equipping students to learn in situations in which teachers and examinations are not present to focus their attention' ([10], p. 3). If we aspire to achieve more sustainable assessment for CYW students, lecturers and students will be required to reflect on how assessment might be more usefully aligned with CYW praxis. How can assessment be reconfigured, enhanced and developed sustainably as a means of creating an authentic constructive alignment on the boundaries of informal and formal education?

Our analysis of student perspectives on educating informal educators has thus raised more questions than answers, particularly in areas that were not selected by respondents. For example, the lack of focus on international development/international perspectives is

concerning, as many programmes pride themselves on the international links they try to forge. Yet, within this predominantly UK context, it seems that students and graduates do not see international perspectives at the forefront of their curriculum. Other examples of low selection areas (less than five responses) included psychological perspectives, project and people management, culture/cultural planning/cultural contexts and academic study. These responses make us reflect on the future progression and focus of CYW professional HE programmes.

Analysis confirms that we can claim to apply critical pedagogy as an emancipatory practice which 'offers a powerful device for enabling us to challenge mainstream representations' ([42], p. 40) within the context of a power-laden university environment. However, this is not without its challenges. As Seal [42] noted, 'we teach it in universities, which are formal, rule bound, with distinct hierarchies and often elitist and reinforce multiple hegemonies' ([42], p. 24). This work, drawing on case studies from academics around the world, about teaching critical pedagogy exemplified the applied nature of civic education in Finland, where graduates were identified as community educators as part of an aim to 'educate experts for professional working life' ([42], p. 59). However, it did not offer empirical evidence or case study examples on how these theories were applied to the HE teaching practices of their home institutions. Thus, in considering the extent to which critical pedagogy is modelled in teaching emancipatory practice in CYW programmes, our analysis offers insights on a kind of civic education of professional CYW practitioners. In turn, this aligns with the idea of a civic university, where more effective engagement between HEIs and local communities is key to enabling institutions to meet their social responsibilities and 'to act as catalysts for social change with the potential to address and mitigate a variety of social problems' ([41], p. 4), where it is argued that 'critical pedagogy ... offers not just a framework for action, but a set of guiding principles that might inform aspects of teaching, research, citizenship and knowledge exchange' ([12], p. 142).

## 5. Conclusions

Reflecting critically on student perceptions regarding teaching, learning and assessment in CYW programmes demonstrates a resistance to mainstream representations of institutional power. Our assertion is that boundary crossing persisted at the interface between the formal and informal paradigms. Furthermore, there was evidence of a more holistic and critical pedagogical approach in areas of teaching and learning that was aligned with methods from CYW practice. To a lesser extent, there was some evidence of shifting assessment practices in HE that did model critical pedagogy, but more traditional methods persisted. This showed that across a range of professionally qualifying degree programmes, critical pedagogy was theorised and taught as an emancipatory practice that operated on the boundaries between formal and informal learning within HEIs and was constructively aligned with CYW professional praxis.

Having held a mirror up to our own HE practices, the results of our analysis of student and graduate views inform our understanding that we are effective as informal educators within formal educational contexts. The discussion showed that in theorising, and in many teaching and learning contexts, CYW students provided evidence of an experience that was clearly and constructively aligned with critical pedagogy. This finding aligns with recent work from Seal [49] in advocating for hopeful pedagogies and celebrating those pedagogies in HE that challenge dominant discourses and strive for a more utopian reading of the world.

Yet, when it came to assessment, this alignment was less obvious, particularly in relation to assessment methods. Our focus on the application of critical pedagogy in HE practice as a catalyst for institutional change suggests that there is much to celebrate in the research results, as CYW programmes do prepare students as experts in critical pedagogy that can be applied in CYW practice. However, the results also show that many programmes seemed to be constrained in shifting pedagogic and assessment practices to fully embrace and model this alignment with emancipatory practice. There remains a

challenge in bringing about more widespread change within HE institutions to enhance the experiences of our students and their emerging role as community practitioners. The idea of social responsibility in HE creates an opportunity for working within our various institutions to change practices. Our research confirms that we are already working at the interface between formal, informal and professional education within many HEIs. In seeking to promote social responsibility as a framework for equality and social justice, our CYW programmes are well-placed to drive institutional change forward in the interests of our students, our profession and the communities we serve.

**Author Contributions:** Writing—original draft, S.G., A.C. and E.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was approved by the School of Education and Social Sciences Ethics Committee, University of West of Scotland.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

- Batsleer, J. *Informal Learning in Youth Work*; Sage: London, UK, 2008.
- Beggan, E.; Coburn, A. Creating ‘one big masterpiece’: Synthesis in Creative Arts Youth Work. *Concept* **2018**, *9*, 15–30.
- Cooper, C.; Gormally, S.; Hughes, G. *Socially Just, Radical Alternatives for Education and Youth Work Practice: Re-Imagining Ways of Working with Young People*; Palgrave Mac Millan: Basingstoke, UK, 2015.
- Ledwith, M. *Community Development: A Critical and Radical Approach*; Bristol University Press: Bristol, UK, 2020.
- Tett, L.; Hamilton, M. (Eds.) Introduction: Resisting Neoliberalism in Education. In *Resisting Neoliberalism in Education: Local, National and Transnational Perspectives*; Policy Press: Bristol, UK, 2019.
- Coburn, A.; Gormally, S. *Communities for Social Change: Practicing Equality and Social Justice in Youth and Community Work*; Peter Lang: New York, NY, USA, 2017.
- Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 2nd ed.; Ramos, M.B., Ed.; Penguin: London, UK, 1996.
- Hooks, B. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*; Routledge: New York, NY, USA, 1994.
- Biggs, J.B. *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*; Open University: Buckingham, UK, 2003.
- Boud, D.; Falchicov, N. Assessment and emotion: The impact of being assessed. In *Rethinking Assessment for Higher Education: Learning for the Longer Term*; Routledge: London, UK, 2007.
- Coburn, A. Building social and cultural capital through learning about equality in youth work. *J. Youth Stud.* **2010**, *14*, 475–491. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Wallace, D. Identifying with Borders and Boundaries: The Place of Critical Pedagogy as Social Responsibility Education. In *University—Community Partner-Ships for Promoting Social Responsibility in Higher Education*; Sengupta, E., Blessenger, P., Mahoney, C., Eds.; Emerald: Bingley, UK, 2020.
- Antonovsky, A. The salutogenic model as a theory to guide health promotion. *Health Promot. Int.* **1996**, *11*, 11–18. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Taberner, A.M. The marketisation of the English higher education sector and its impact on academic staff and the nature of their work. *Int. J. Organ. Anal.* **2018**, *26*, 129–152. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Giroux, H. *Border Crossings. Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education*, 2nd ed.; Routledge: Abingdon, UK, 2005.
- Mezirow, J. An Overview of Transformative Learning. In *Contemporary Theories of Learning: Learning Theorists in Their Own Words*; Illeris, K., Ed.; Routledge: Abingdon, UK, 2009; pp. 90–105.
- Gormally, S.; Coburn, A. Finding Nexus: Connecting youth work and research practices. *Br. Educ. Res. J.* **2014**, *40*, 869–885. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Baker, J.; Lynch, K.; Cantillon, S.; Walsh, J. *Equality: From Theory to Action*; Palgrave MacMillan: Basingstoke, UK, 2009.
- Boyatzis, R. *Transforming Qualitative Information: Thematic Analysis and Code Development*; Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA, 1998.
- Freire, P. *Education for Critical Consciousness*, 3rd ed.; Bloomsbury: London, UK, 2014.
- Lankshear, C.; McLaren, P. (Eds.) *Critical Literacy: Radical and Postmodernist Perspectives*; Suny Press: New York, NY, USA, 1993.
- McLaren, P. Critical Pedagogy: A Look at Major Concepts. In *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, 3rd ed.; Darder, A., Torred, R.D., Baltón-dano, M.P., Eds.; Routledge: Abingdon, UK, 2017.
- Darder, A.; Torred, R.D.; Baltón-dano, M.P. (Eds.) *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, 3rd ed.; Routledge: Abingdon, UK, 2017.
- Community Development National Occupational Standards. 2015. Available online: <https://cldstandardscouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CDNOSTandards2015.pdf> (accessed on 10 September 2021).
- Youth Work National Occupational Standards. 2019. Available online: <https://cldstandardscouncil.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/CombinedYouthWorkNOS.pdf> (accessed on 3 August 2021).



26. Martin, G. Scaling critical pedagogy in higher education. *Crit. Stud. Educ.* **2017**, *58*. [CrossRef]
27. Lynch, K.; Baker, J. Equality in Education: An equality of condition perspective. *Theory Res. Educ.* **2005**, *3*, 131–164. [CrossRef]
28. Batsleer, J.; Davies, B. *What Is Youth Work?* Learning Matters: Exeter, UK, 2010.
29. Coburn, A.; Gormally, S.; Bright, G. Youth Work in Schools. In *Youth Work: Histories, Policy and Contexts*; Springer International Publishing: Berlin/Heidelberg, Germany, 2015; pp. 199–215.
30. Jakubowski, L.M.; Burman, P. Teaching Community Development: A Case Study in Community-Based Learning. *Am. Sociol. Assoc.* **2004**, *32*, 160–176. [CrossRef]
31. Steffes, J.S. Creating Powerful Learning Environments: Beyond the Classroom. *Chang. Mag. High. Learn.* **2004**, *36*, 46–50. [CrossRef]
32. Sheridan, I.; Linehan, M. A Partnership Approach to Work Placement in Higher Education. 2013. Available online: <http://eprints.teachingandlearning.ie/3703> (accessed on 15 September 2021).
33. Reddy, P.; Moores, E. Measuring the benefits of a psychology placement year. *Assess. Eval. High. Educ.* **2006**, *31*, 551–567. [CrossRef]
34. Little, B.; Harvey, L. Learning Through Work Placements and Beyond. A report for the Higher Education Careers Services Unit and the Higher Education Academy's Work Placements Organisation Forum. *High. Educ. Careers Serv. Unit.* **2006**, *1*, 2013.
35. Boud, D. Sustainable Assessment: Rethinking assessment for the learning society. *Stud. Contin. Educ.* **2000**, *22*, 151–167. [CrossRef]
36. Hounsell, D. Student feedback, learning and development. In *Higher Education and the Life Course*; Slowey, M., Watson, D., Eds.; SRHE and OUP: Buckingham, UK, 2003.
37. Hounsell, D. Towards More Sustainable Feedback to Students. In *Rethinking Assessment for Higher Education: Learning for the Longer Term*; Boud, D., Falchikov, N., Eds.; Routledge: London, UK, 2007; pp. 101–133.
38. Boud, D.; Falchikov, N. Developing Assessment for Informing Judgement. In *Rethinking Assessment for Higher Education: Learning for the Longer Term*; Boud, D., Falchikov, N., Eds.; Routledge: London, UK, 2007; pp. 181–197.
39. Alston, P. Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights. 2019. Available online: <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/41/39/Add.1> (accessed on 3 August 2021).
40. Alston, P. *Responses to COVID-19 Are Failing People in Poverty Worldwide—UN Human Rights Expert*; United Nations Office of the High Commissioner Human Rights: New York, NY, USA, 2020. Available online: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25815&LangID=E> (accessed on 13 July 2021).
41. Sengupta, E.; Blessinger, P.; Mahoney, C. (Eds.) *University–Community Partnerships for Promoting Social Responsibility in Higher Education*; Emerald: Bingley, UK, 2020.
42. Seal, M. (Ed.) *Teaching Youth Work in Higher Education: Tensions, Connections, Continuities and Contradictions*. 2019. Available online: [https://www.theseus.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/306945/Teaching\\_Youth\\_Work\\_in\\_Higher\\_Education\\_web\\_%28002%29.pdf?sequence=1](https://www.theseus.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/306945/Teaching_Youth_Work_in_Higher_Education_web_%28002%29.pdf?sequence=1) (accessed on 12 September 2021).
43. Anglas Grande, S.M. American Indian Geographies of Identity and Power: At the crossroads of Indigena and Mestizaje. In *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*; Darder, A., Baltodano, M., Torres, R., Eds.; Routledge: Abingdon, UK, 2009; pp. 183–208.
44. Community Learning and Development Standards Council for Scotland. *The Competent Practitioner Framework: Using the CLD Competences to Reflect, Develop and Progress*; Standards Council Scotland: Glasgow, Scotland, UK, 2018. Available online: <https://cldstandardscouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CompetentPractitionerFramework.pdf> (accessed on 12 September 2021).
45. Lynch, K. Foreword: The Imperative to Resist. In *Resisting Neoliberalism in Education: Local, National and Transnational Perspectives*; Tett, L., Hamilton, M., Eds.; Policy Press: Bristol, UK, 2019.
46. Gormally, S.; Beggan, E.; Coburn, A. Community, COVID-19, Challenge and Change, Policy Scotland. 2020. Available online: <https://policyscotland.gla.ac.uk/community-covid-19-challenge-and-change> (accessed on 3 August 2021).
47. Beck, R.J.; Skinner, W.F.; Schwabrow, L.A. A study of sustainable assessment theory in higher education tutorials. *Assess. Eval. High. Educ.* **2013**, *38*, 326–348. [CrossRef]
48. Boud, D.; Soler, R. Sustainable assessment revisited. *Assess. Eval. High. Educ.* **2016**, *41*, 400–413. [CrossRef]
49. Seal, M. *Hopeful Pedagogies in Higher Education*; Bloomsbury Critical Education: London, UK, 2021.