



FEATURE

Creative Pedagogies in Uncertain Times: What is Essential? A Conversation with Paul Gorman of Hidden Giants

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DOI Number: <https://doi.org/10.26203/6b2n-f731>

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To cite this feature: Gorman, P. and Cross, B. (2021). Creative Pedagogies in Uncertain Times: What is Essential? A Conversation with Paul Gorman of Hidden Giants. *Education in the North*, **28**(1) pp. 172-180.



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Creative Pedagogies in Uncertain Times: What is Essential?

A Conversation with Paul Gorman of Hidden Giants

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While bringing together this issue it has been inspiring to learn of work at many different points on the globe. There is work here in Scotland that also touches on the themes of the issue. One educator doing such work is Paul Gorman and the company Hidden Giants. Hidden Giants supports learners, teachers and leaders to create the conditions for change that grow cultures which are empowered, agentic, and brave. Working in partnership with schools from across Scotland and in international contexts their aim is to co-create the conditions for meaningful and sustainable change to take place. To understand their approach a bit better, the explanation of the name Hidden Giants is a good place to start:

“We acknowledge and work with the giants that lay hidden in our system: things we know but tend to avoid, i.e. the elephants in the room or what lies beneath the iceberg. These things can be difficult to speak about but if we shy away from them, we will never truly reimagine.” ([Hidden Giants](#))

Conversations and storytelling are very rich sources of reflection that academic practices can squeeze out of the picture. In this feature we attempt to recreate room for them to explore what is happening at the margins here in Scotland that helps us rethink what Art Education can be about:

Beth: How's it going? You're a busy man.

Paul: Yeah, I mean we're all busy, I think it's like what we are busy doing that becomes the question and I hope I'm busy doing productive stuff and not just nonsense. . . We've been speaking about this a lot - the need in winter to stop and hibernate and then recognise that spring is on the way and energy levels change. But what's happened?

I think because of the latest lockdown and the fear that people aren't being busy enough, everybody's then went into this Hyperdrive of being more busy and having more screen time and I'm a bit like: We are in winter. We're not meant to be doing this.

Beth: A long time ago I saw this article. I wish I'd kept it, but it was about what dairy farmers can teach businesses. It was about organic dairy farmers, the whole idea of working with nature, rotating crops, leaving some land fallow: actually, businesses are full of organic organisms as well as dairy farms. And that this whole thing that we can somehow mould ourselves to fit the mechanics we've created, instead of fitting the mechanics to support life...But we're still chipping away at that one aren't we?

Paul: Oh yeah

Beth: I saw that that you were offering to open up the curriculum you are developing in a way that was going to involve a public event at National Galleries so I thought I would ask, just what are you up to and is it disrupting marginality in education?

Paul: There are things I do know, and things I don't know. I'll start with what I do know and I know the project in Blackburn, with the National Galleries of Scotland, which is a good place to start. So there was a document called Pedagogies of Uncertainty, which I can send you. It's a really interesting read, very accessible by a Dutch academic, Rebekah Tauritz, who was studying at Edinburgh Uni, and she comes at it from a lens of sustainability in terms of like environmental sustainability, but it's very much about curriculum design and she talks about these competences of uncertainty. And myself, and Liz from the National Galleries went: "this is what we've been talking about!" How do we make the curriculum using uncertainty as a stimulus, as a provocation?

And so we created this project where artists and teachers are working together to examine how uncertainty can assist them in making the curriculum in a participatory context with their pupils. So it's been really interesting because it's very disruptive and I think a lot of the discourses within education about how uncertainty is a bad thing, about how we need to get back to normality and about how children needs routine. And I go, "yeah, there's an aspect of that I totally agree with, but also, to deny uncertainty means to deny life". A bit like what we're talking about, actually, with organic farming, it's like you can't control everything. And then within that where does the curriculum sit? *I believe the curriculum is a lived experience*, it shouldn't be something that's constantly planned. And to allow for that, then, I think teachers need to have a different skill base and a different outlook on life, a different mindset, which then allows or invites permission from children to go: "OK, let's do this differently".

So all that's happening now in Blackburn. And as you say, we also said, well, let's make it even riskier and have these open sessions. So rather than wait till the end of the project to tell people how it's going, we wanted to open it up and do open heart surgery in a live context and

say: "Tell us why it's messy, tell us about the process, tell us where it's not working." And sit with some of these things that feel really uncomfortable. Is that disruptive and does it disrupt this sort of margins? Then yes, I would argue it does, because it feels vulnerable every time we do it. We've only done it once, but it felt vulnerable. It felt putting the team that I'm meant to be leading, co-leading with Liz, it feels that we're putting them into vulnerable places. So yeah, that's what I know so far. I think just now.

Beth: Can you walk me through what a session when you're working with Blackburn primary looks like or feels like?

Paul: Yeah, so, initially, it started with the question, "What is essential?" which, in itself is hugely provocative. And who determines what's essential? Quite often within a school context, adults decide what's essential without any basis of understanding other than: "well, another adults decided that."

So, to ask young people and children what is essential within the middle of a global pandemic, you then get lots of interesting responses and stimulus that the artist and the teacher then notice. So a normal session for us moves away from the artist and teacher delivering to pupils, to much more about the artist and the teachers working together so the session would be a dialogue where, through a series of provocations the artists are asking the teachers to notice what's happening within the environment, then, through conversation figure out what seems to matter. And then decide on actions that usually become provocations for the following conversation and the teacher then is the one who takes responsibility to go away and deliver those provocations, or unleash those provocations, *which then establishes another process of noticing, mattering and actioning. So it creates this sustainable culture of working with uncertainty.*

Beth: It sounds like a Kolb learning cycle?

Paul: Totally

Beth: But you're being really transparent that everybody is learning?

Paul: Totally, yeah? but one of the challenges is that not everybody in the education system is open to learning.

(a little shared laughter here)

Beth: Well, sometimes that means there is a need to unlearn and people can be resistant to that. In situations of crisis and stress, people become more resistant to unlearning.

Paul: Yeah, it doesn't mean it's not important, it's probably even more important. It's just how you facilitate those conversations and hold those spaces because they are uneasy.

Beth: So I would argue that arts education has always been at the margins of formal education. Perhaps it's because it's misunderstood, what it can do is not is not fully appreciated. So when you say you know the artist and the teacher are thinking of what's essential and coming up with provocations that can unleash something, I'm just really curious about that. I just wondered if you could say a little bit more about that. My hunch is that maybe that way of working with arts can help it move in from the margins.

Paul: It can as long as the artists have the confidence, ability and are willing to take the risk that moves it. And I'm not speaking directly about the Blackburn project. I'm speaking from sort of a historical perspective, about what I have seen organisations and people do. They don't position themselves at the heart of education. They sometimes position themselves at the fringes and then get annoyed that nobody takes them seriously. And I go, well, you're the only one that can change that, because the system will never take you seriously if you constantly position yourself like that. It's problematic. It goes back to Matassaro's Use or Ornament: "What use are you? Are you simply a decoration on the wall?" I think a lot of artists still position themselves when they work within a school to be decorative. It's an ornament. It makes things nicer. We talk about wellbeing and everything is wonderful. I get that. But what use do you have within sustainable, disruptive, curriculum, leadership, policy? That's where I get excited, because *within a society context artist, good artist, position themselves in that space, not by saying we need to go and sit in the heart of government, but by provoking society to look differently inwards at itself and go, "Oh my God, we didn't see that"*. And if an artist is able to do that within a school or within an education system, THAT'S where it becomes super exciting. Because you don't know what's gonna happen.

Beth: Help me imagine how that works. Could you share with me some of the provocations that the students at Blackburn are working with?

Paul: Yeah, so, one of the children said, "artists aren't essential". And artist was sitting in the room. And Jack goes: "I'm not essential?" And this pupil goes: "No, you're not essential. Art is not essential within the society." And that has become the provocation. So Jack, as an artist, has become the provocation to either prove or disprove this young guy's belief that art is not essential. And what Jack does with that

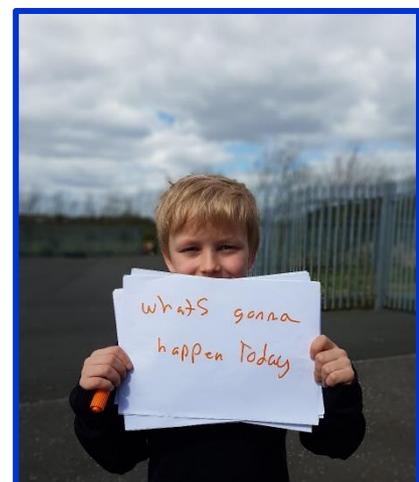


Figure 1 Provocations to work with
Uncertain, starting with a child's view

provocation is simple: let's build a website together. So he's now building a website that he's never done before. So he's working with uncertainty, with this class, looking at the role of art. And so they're looking at these different examples within the National Gallery's drawing from pieces and work there. They're looking at what they love, what they don't love, all that sort of stuff, what relevance it has. So he's sort of trying to drag art into the discourse that exists within Blackburn Primary.

Because, before, art was seen as the decoration. So that becomes the stimulus to ask: What else might we not be thinking of? What else are we not thinking about, that might be useful when looking at this thing called learning or curriculum design? Or curriculum making?

You also have, I suppose, a more traditional arts education input in that the artists are offering tasks to do. And I think this is where it becomes interesting, because the task can be seen as quite procedural. Like, if you do that with your children, then they will do x,y,z. But for me the skill then becomes, how do you move that into the personal or the critical? So rather than the teacher saying, "Oh I could do this again with my class and I will do it next year or next month." It's not about the replication of the activity, or the provocation, it's about saying: "what happened in your space that was different from before?"

So if you take art out, these things weren't happening. You put art in and these things DID happen and you either go: "Yes, because of that activity" or you say, "What if it's because of this thing called art or creativity or culture or whatever, that allows these other things that you want to happen." *What are those things? I would argue it's things like: autonomy, collaboration, participation, self-belief, loads of Maslow stuff, confidence, level playing field, knowledge as self, not external.* Likes all these key components which I think are more educational based discourse. The teacher then goes. "Well how do you do that?" That's great because You then build a relationship and it moves from being about an arts workshop to much more about a creative artistic process of learning and that's where the pedagogies then kick in and you go: "Right. Cool. We're off." But that takes a really highly skilled, trained artist or creative who can hold those types of conversations.

Beth: --or a critical educator who is also an artist. I think hopefully art in and of itself-- if you're studying what artists have done, they have tried to be critical awareness-raisers and it's maybe this translation that's needed: to see that the engine of art actually should be, or can be, the engine of curriculum and pedagogy.

Paul: As you say, I think that's the trick that we miss: what is art for? *I quite often start with: what is art for? what is school for? What is learning for? If you have a deep exploration of*

what that means, then you can start doing the thing. It's is a bit like Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed. It's important to ask: "What is it you're actually doing here?" Not enough people interrogate that. They just do it, "cause we want to be busy" and I go: "Stop. Stop. What are you doing?"

You can get into the horrible, glitchy thing of: "Let's do some nice art workshops" Let's look at who's this serving? There's a really interesting book called Culture is Bad for You and it sets up this brilliant situation, when it's like, we all pretend that culture and creativity in the arts are brilliant, but, actually, when you look at it, culture falls into all the same traps that the rest of society does. It's unequal. It's dominated by white, middle class men making decisions on behalf of others. There is a serious issue with gender. There's a serious issue with race. All these things are present, but, we go: "Oh but, we're doing nice art for people." And it's like, yeah, but what if that reinforces all this stuff that shouldn't be reinforced? We are not doing art; we are part of this horrific system. Getting into those types of conversations is --

Beth: --it kind of leads to the question that I wanted to ask, which has to do with the special issue that we're doing this conversation for. It is particularly focussed on indigenous contributions to disrupting marginality. So I'm interested in the name of your organisation. Giants are part of our indigenous culture. In ways that might be hidden. They might not be so hidden. So my question is, where did Hidden Giants come from? Why do you call it that? What's its back story?

Paul: I'll send your our story just so you've got it in text but, it comes from lots of different sources. One of them is, I'm really tall. So when I walk into school and say I'm from Hidden Giants, they say, "I can see; your huge." And I go. "Yeah, I know." So, there's a play on that. I really like the idea of the giant is something that you fear, initially. It's the other. It's the thing that you should be frightened of. And quite often in sort of traditional children's narrative, the closer you get to the giant, the more helpful or useful the situation becomes, as in The Selfish Giant or Hagrid. And so the thing that you are frightened of, actually, is a thing that might unlock something important. So there's a play on exploring fear and vulnerability and where that might lead.

I love the idea of something that is impossible. So how do you hide a giant? And people will either have the mindset of: "I don't know. Let's try." Or, "I don't know. It's impossible. So what's the point?" And I go, "*We need to get more into the camp of let's all get dead excited about doing this thing that feels impossible.*" So there's that.

I think hide and seek is a brilliant game. That's my favourite game to play. I think it sets up this really interesting spatial awareness of using a space, but being very different within it. And I love that. The last one which is the most important is the idea of hidden potential. I go crazy about our education system, because I see lots of giants and there's lots of hidden giants, children, teachers, head teachers. It drives me crazy because they're only hidden because of



Figure 2: Finding the hidden giants and inspiring trojan mice

the system that they're working within. They need to be unleashed. And I would like to think *a collaboration with a hidden giant leads further to another hidden giants emerging*. It's this sort of idea of one revolution engenders another revolution. It goes back to

Simon Bolivar, South American revolutionists, we need to be the thing that will lead to the next thing. So that's what Hidden Giants ultimately aims to do. Which is why it's Hidden Giants and not just Hidden Giant. It's not just me. So that's why.

Beth: What you said is so provocative and so rich, I almost don't want to kind of veer off to another topic, but I guess I have some little awareness that the project that you are doing in Blackburn is part of a larger project and I don't know, do you want to talk about that? Over to you.

Paul: I think the larger projects is an interesting idea because I suppose the larger project IS education reform or changing the pedagogies and practices that exist within mainstream education. The bigger sort of project is the idea of how we create sustainable change within the communities that we work with in, not by bulldozing, but, well, we talk about creating these *Armies of Trojan Mice*. It's a really useful metaphor, trojan mice, I think. We don't need any more Trojan horses. The Trojan horse is the thing that reconfirms the idea of toxic masculinity. We don't need another group of horrible, abusive male soldiers to come and replace that last horrible male, dominant ones. So you don't need any more Trojan horses, but you might need these Trojan mice.

It sits uncomfortably with us because the Trojan mouse is unnoticed. Like the Hidden Giant is unnoticed. In this capitalist world in which we live, people want to be noticed. It's a disaster because, noticed for doing what? Does it matter? "No, no I'm busy. Notice me, notice me,

notice me! Look” what I’m wearing, look what I’m doing!” Well, what if we didn't do that? What if we went about our business being experimental, being exploratory, being risky, being values driven, being participatory? These small children steps, brave steps lead in different directions which excites me.

Beth: I guess my last question would be. What spurred you on or gave you the courage to take some of these conceptual leaps?

Paul: It's simple; it's just not good enough.

Beth: In your own experience in your own life, can you tell me a little bit about how you discovered that?

Paul: I mean I could tell like numerous stories. One, I always go back to is standing in that classroom with a group of 11 year olds who were about to go into secondary education and I asked them what makes a great story. And he said: “punctuation, spelling and grammar.” And my heart sank and I said: This? Is this is it?” I looked at the teacher, and she shrugged her shoulders and it was like: “This is what my job is. My job is to teach them punctuation, spelling and grammar.” And unfortunately, that's what they understand is storytelling. That's what makes a great story. And I went: “Well, No. No!”

Beth: That’s an amazing story and it really connects to something I learned. Before I went into higher education, I was a community arts worker, even before I was a community arts worker, I was working with young, homeless and I was getting really disillusioned. So I went to this ceilidh and it was a house ceilidh, and I met Duncan Williamson, who is a traditional traveller. He died 13 years ago but he was a tradition bearer, a wonderful storyteller who was invited into schools. I spent quite a bit of time with him. And one of the first things he would do with a class--he would never tell stories to strangers, he always made them friends first. He would develop this lovely feeling of being together and being in an adventure together. Talking with a class, one of the questions that he would ask was, what makes a good story. And pupils would come up with answers like in your story. He would say, no, they would keep guessing, keep guessing, like they were answering a riddle, until finally he would tell them his answer: a good listener. And by that he did not mean someone who was sitting on their hands. He meant the story lived in the imagination of the listener. *And you could feel this sea change of empowerment come over the class. You could literally feel the wind fill the sails of their imagination.* All the children realised they were important. The story wasn't going to go anywhere, unless they took it someplace. I was in a classroom with him because he was paying it forward like that. He was trying to inspire people who came after him to tell stories in

a way that would mean that some of the richness that he experienced of his life would pass on. So it's just amazing to listen to the things that you're saying, because they chime with that story.

Paul: It's a lovely story. It's a really useful story. We don't consider that someone is listening quite often, 'cause we're too busy, like, blah, blah blah-- . But it is that, yeah, a collaboration.

Beth: I've actually told stories at Blackburn Primary a long time ago. And I would say that I don't get to do enough storytelling now, but that's how I learned how to tell stories is to look at people's eyes and see how it's living in their eyes, and to take the cue as to how you tell that story from them.

Paul: So I was just also gonna say it becomes about the politics of the situation, where, who's telling these stories? Do you know what I mean? That's where I get a wee bit frustrated that the stories that children hear in this society are not their stories. So in Blackburn they did a project with us a couple years ago about super noodles, right? And the whole curriculum became about super noodles. And that's what was their story, because they really, really, really loved super noodles. And I went, well who am I to deny them access to something that they love? That's wrong; that's an abuse of power telling them about little Red Riding Hood or reading *The Hunger Games* or whatever, because I think it's more beneficial, is of more value. It's wrong. We get it wrong all the time and children learn that their stories, their voice, their life, their neighbourhoods aren't of value. Well, they are of value. Of course they are of value. We need to respond through curriculum making to allow them to see that. If they don't see it in school, then they reject it. I would reject it.

Beth: Yeah, if you don't see yourself in school, why should you commit to this school project?

Paul: Not at all.

Beth: I think there is a real crisis of loyalties that children are faced with.

Paul: Totally, just like every other part of society. If you don't see the story, if you don't see your story, then I would reject that and we are getting somewhere with equalities within our society. I mean slow, bloody slow steps, small steps, but within the school system I don't think it's reached it, this idea that equalities means children seeing their stories in their school environment.

Beth: We're coming to the end of the time we have. That's a provocative place to leave the conversation, but maybe that's a good thing. There are a lot of rich points in here I will continue to think about. Thank you for your time.