

Comment

## On Well-Being, Activism and Ethical Practice: Response to Trentin, Lisa. Sharing Histories: Teaching and Learning from Displaced Youth in Greece. *Humanities* 2018, 7, 53

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**Abstract:** In this response to Lisa Trentin’s article, I explore themes that bring together research and activism, through engagement with the past, and the ethics that concerns such endeavours. I demonstrate the overlaps with my own work into well-being and heritage and suggest that broadening out work to include mixed groups may increase the effects of reciprocity noted by Lisa Trentin. I argue that research, as well as teaching, which takes on the decolonizing principles that Lisa Trentin espouses, especially that which includes disenfranchised communities, needs to be done equitably and in ways that are ethical, compassionate and respectful.

**Keywords:** well-being; diversity; activism; ethics; social bonding

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Many ideas sparked in my mind on reading Lisa Trentin’s article. Much resonated with my own work—cue scribbles of ‘Yes!’ in margins—and also made me reflect on my own practice in more depth. As such, I could write on numerous topics in response. I will, however, restrict myself to three themes: (1) engagement with the past as a route to well-being and (2) teaching, and research, as activism, and (3) how to ensure that practices in these areas are ethical.

The idea that engaging with the past in the present might be beneficial to well-being has a growing amount of supporting evidence (for a useful summary of projects, see [\(All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Welfare 2017; What Works Wellbeing 2019\)](#); on archaeology, historic landscapes and well-being: [\(Darvill et al.\)](#)). The additional element in my work, and in Lisa Trentin’s work, is the nature of the communities with whom we are working: in her case young refugee communities in Greece; in mine, people of Middle Eastern heritage living in the UK.

In my own work to date I have used the What Works Wellbeing’s categories and definitions in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of why hands-on approaches to heritage are beneficial for well-being. These categories are:

1. The personal dimension: confidence, self-esteem, meaning and purpose, increased optimism and reduced anxiety;
2. The cultural dimension: coping and resilience, capability and achievement, personal identity, creative skills and expression;
3. The social dimension: belonging and identity, sociability and new connections, bonding, reciprocity and reducing social inequalities.

Following a pair of workshops on felting Iraqi heritage in 2018, in collaboration with artist Karin Celestine, I asked participants to reflect on their experience in regards to these three categories of well-being. Ethical approval was sought for this project from the Royal Holloway ethics board and

full consent, including optional anonymity, was sought from participants. A full account of these responses is published in (Kamash 2019), so here I will summarise where there seem to be overlaps between my workshops and Lisa Trentin's work. Firstly, I should point out that, unlike Lisa Trentin's work, my groups were mixed and included British people, Iraqi people, both those recently displaced and those settled long-term, and British Iraqi people with mixed heritage. As will be seen this did result in some differences from Lisa Trentin's work around reciprocity and bonding, where this effect rippled more broadly through my work.

One of the striking similarities across our projects was the empowerment of the people we were working with (personal and cultural dimensions). In my workshops, Rana, Yasmin and Deema, for example, felt that expressing their personal identity through a medium other than words was "refreshing for [their] Iraqi identity". This space to explore difficult and anxiety-inducing experiences was also valued by Muna, who said it left her "feeling elated". Such empowerment was also encountered by Lisa Trentin's students, who "became aware, too, of the importance of *their* voices and the power of sharing *their* stories" (Trentin 2018, p. 8). My only critique of Lisa Trentin's work here is that I felt that those voices might be given more space to come through. There are, of course, extremely sensitive ethical and safe-guarding issues around what might be appropriate to share; guarantees of anonymity would be one way to mitigate this, while also amplifying the voices of people who have little or no platform for their expression.

Being able to share stories in these ways enables social bonding and reciprocity (social dimension). Lisa Trentin notes that the experience of working in small groups led to the sharing of stories and increased understanding of each other (Trentin 2018, pp. 12–13). This kind of reciprocity was also experienced by numerous people who participated in my workshops. Karen, for example, observed that after sharing experiences and stories with people with Iraqi backgrounds at a workshop, it "made Iraq ... feel like more than just a place I hear of on the news (sort of 3D rather than 2D if you know what I mean)". This is where the power of having mixed groups seems to lie. In Lisa Trentin's work, it seems that she had that transformative experience, which in my workshops was able to ripple out into a wider group of people. This is not a criticism of Lisa Trentin's work—far from it—rather an observation of how such work might develop in the future. The intimacy of these situations also seems vital to their success in generating the trust and ease necessary for this kind of social bonding; yet it also poses a problem: how do we scale up such engagement and exchange of ideas to meet the needs of the many, many people who would benefit without losing the very element that makes it work? There seems to be no easy answer to that question.

Another issue related to both personal identity and reciprocity is how we talk about 'difference' and 'diversity'. This issue came up in Lisa Trentin's article, where the people she was working with expressed strong concerns about being different in the place where they now were, but also about not wanting to lose their Syrian identity (Trentin 2018, p. 8). Key for me here is that work aiming at building cultural understanding needs to strike a delicate balance. It is all too easy to assume that in order to build cultural bridges, we need to focus on our similarities as a way of bringing people together. This is, of course, important—people can always find a point of similarity, if they look hard enough—but it is not the whole story. We also need to acknowledge that we are different and celebrate that diversity. We need to find ways to be comfortable with similarity and difference co-existing. This may be where the power of the past lies: it is a space in which we can find both similarity and difference, which we can explore at a seemingly safe distance. This safe distance effect has also been observed in the 'Sex and History' project, where using objects from the past allows a less confrontational way in to tricky subject matter (Sex and History n.d.). It seems, then, that the past, accessed in multiple ways, Classical or otherwise, might provide us with tools to examine complex identities in the present, without the need to find exact equivalences. I feel this wish for acceptance of both similarity and difference lies at the heart of the anxiety expressed by the refugees in Lisa Trentin's piece. As a person of mixed heritage (both British and Iraqi), this anxiety resonates: I am neither one nor the other, but, crucially, I have come to realise that I do not need to be; I can be me, simultaneously similar and different to

those around me. One of the most touching and rewarding parts of my own work has been seeing the working out and acknowledgement of those similarities and differences by people coming to the workshops. I wonder here whether the displaced youth in Greece would have felt a similar building of reciprocity and so had some of their anxieties eased, if there had been possibilities for them to interact in similar workshops with people from a range of backgrounds and experiences; this might be an additional step to take in the future.

Of course making interventions in this way brings with it questions around ethics and responsibilities. As demonstrated by Lisa Trentin this can so easily go wrong, even if well-intentioned: for example, her students being “deeply disturbed” by the plaster-dipped clothing and their “bemused” reaction to the replica arch from Palmyra (Trentin 2018, pp. 7–8; see also Kamash 2017) on visitor responses to this replica arch that echo these responses). Misjudged initiatives such as these will continue to exist as long as no prioritisation is given to co-production and equitable partnerships (for guidance on equitable partnerships, see (Rethinking Research Collaborative 2018)). One of the strengths of Lisa Trentin’s work in this regard is its sensitivity and humanity. She demonstrates the caution that needs to be exercised about the repercussions of discussing certain topics and the choices of material used so as to prevent any further trauma through engagement with them (Trentin 2018, p. 9). Rather than going for shock-value, Lisa Trentin found a way of working where difficult issues could still be confronted, but in ways that were compassionate and respectful.

Lisa Trentin very much views her work as teaching, and talks, quite rightly, in terms of an activist pedagogy (Trentin 2018, pp. 13–14). I cannot agree more that teaching decolonially in this way requires us to change ourselves, to break out of the supposed canons that we think bind us and to question whether we really are bound by them at all. What I would add is that this should permeate all parts of academic practice, so that we both teach *and* research decolonially as our everyday practice. The vital meeting point between my work and that of Lisa Trentin’s in this regard is its adaptive approach that allows for participants to influence outcomes. This is empowering for those who have been disenfranchised. Crucially, that empowerment requires a relinquishing of power from the people and places where it traditionally resides, including ourselves as academics when we are tied into those power structures.

Collaborative work such as this has its best chance of success, if it sees a rebalancing of power. If the people and communities we, as academics, are engaging with are not involved from beginning to end in the shaping of projects, then at best the project will fail and at worse it could exacerbate difficult situations and potentially cause resentment and further feelings of powerlessness. For this to work, we, as academics, have to listen, keep listening and be open to hearing what people are telling us. Lisa Trentin did this, acknowledging where she got it wrong, for example in uncomfortable discussions around the role of religion. As Lisa Trentin shows us in her humility, we need to be open to hearing that we are wrong and then make the necessary changes to build and move in a more productive direction. We too need to be ready to learn. For that to work, there has to be trust i.e., the people who are our partners, have to know and feel that there will not be negative repercussions for them in, politely, pointing out mistakes or potentially more fruitful practices. This requires an investment, not just of time, but also of emotional energy; this, I felt, Lisa Trentin got right and I would welcome more work that takes these ethical, respectful and compassionate principles as its starting point.

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