**Conversations in Social Justice:**



**Education, social justice and mental health**

**Podcast transcript**

Series 1. Episode 2.

*Nick Rowe is Director of Converge at York St John, which runs University-based courses in the arts to adults with experience of mental ill-health. In this podcast he talks to Brendan Stone, Professor of social engagement and the humanities at the University of Sheffield. Together they discuss the multiple benefits of opening up universities to work people with mental ill-health and the ways in which we all learn through our encounters with the lived experiences of other people.*

**Nick Rowe**

Hello, this is a recording with Professor Brendan Stone as part of the Institute for Social Justice at York St John University. And the theme will be mental health, social justice and higher education. Although, undoubtedly, our conversations will move around. My name is Nick Rowe, the director of Converge at York St John University. And I'm delighted to have with me today Professor Brendan Stone, who's professor of social engagement and humanities. So as a way of kicking off, I wonder, Brendan, whether you would talk a little bit about the work you've been doing, particularly in relation to mental health, I know you've had a long history with developing mental health work inside universities. So if you could give us a flavour of that, that would be fabulous.

**Brendan Stone**

Well, nice to be with you, Nick. And thank you, I suppose I've done a wide variety of work which touches on issues pertaining to mental health, but most of them have been underpinned by an understanding that people living with, often serious, mental health issues have the same rights as anyone else. A right to education, the right to be heard and listened to.

So I guess my work in this area sort of started off really when I began a project called Storying Sheffield, in which undergraduates studying for a degree in English literature studied alongside, on exactly the same course, going to the same sessions and doing the same work, an equal number of people who were living with serious mental health issues in the city. The content of the course kind of focused on some of the academic subjects that I'm most interested in. I mean, it's difficult to summarise in a sentence or two, but I suppose it was really about human identity and how we understand who we are and our relationship to others and place.

So you know, there would be lectures and seminars in which everybody was together, nobody was demarcated or delineated any differently to anyone else. Everyone was a student. And naturally, as happens in any good teaching situation, learning happens between students and not just from the front of the class. Yes, I guess at the beginning of such projects, it's quite important to have a kind of stable sense of who's in charge. But hopefully, if education is any good, that quickly moves on and people begin to take responsibility for their own learning and become kind of independent members of a group of learners together.

And from the Storying Sheffield project, there's been all manner of other related work that's gone on. The model that we developed, I mean, the NHS run similar projects now. I've run projects in which people training to be doctors and psychiatrists are taught by people with mental health difficulties. Social work students are similarly taught by people with often quite acute needs. I guess underpinning all of this work is a belief that there are various kinds of expertise in mental health and a very important one which is sometimes overlooked or perhaps not understood as deeply as it should be, is that people living with mental health difficulties have a lot to teach us not only about the nature of their experience, but also about what might help and what might not.

**Nick Rowe**

The Storying Sheffield project is, yes I love it. It's a really interesting idea that you developed and one key similarity that it has with Converge here is around the engagement of university students and that learning together. In our case, it's making art together, often making theatre together or writing together. In yours, it's storying together. But for you, do you see that as a crucial way in which a University can contribute not only to its own community, but to its own students. There's a kind of really nice reciprocity there isn't there on both sides?

**Brendan Stone**

Well, I think reciprocity is the key word there. So one of the reasons I kind of devised the project and the various other projects was to do with a concern for the quality of education we were offering our students. And an understanding that, and you know, it's hardly a revolutionary understanding, but just an acknowledgement that to learn about the world it's important to learn from people as well as books and academic articles. And that when one truly meets another person, one can very often find one's assumptions about the world challenged. And it can be sometimes quite an unsettling experience.

But it's a really, really valuable experience as well, especially if one is working closely with and learning from people from very different backgrounds to one's own, whether that be in terms of class, or health or economic security, or ethnicity.

So to really listen and learn from another can move you in a way, I think that is hard probably to achieve simply from reading an academic piece of work. That's not at all to decry the value of academic knowledge, I think it's absolutely critical. But there are also other forms of knowledge, embodied knowledge, lived experiential knowledge.

And I suppose to summarise, people have a lot to teach us and have a lot to teach our students. So this was no way a one way street. I didn't want this to be kind of tentative opening of the door into the Academy, it was made very clear to participants that they were here to give and contribute, and they were important members of a community of learners.

**Nick Rowe**

Well, yeah, that phrase community of learners is one that's cropped up a lot in Converge as well. I very much follow and very much agree with your ideas around that. I was thinking as you spoke about, and you may have come across it, I imagined that the settlement movement from the 19th century, you know, which I think it was Oxford University encouraged its male students, because they were male students at the time, to go to the East End of London and offer education. And the person who set it up was saying, the key thing is that our students will learn as much as they will teach and that the ideas that we're pulling forward have a history there. Although that Settlement tradition got lost at some point.

**Brendan Stone**

Yes, it's not something I know a huge amount about. But I've certainly read about it. One of the things that I know has been important for Converge, and I absolutely share this ethos myself, is to do with the fact that our learning very deliberately happens, and our activity very deliberately happens, within the university. And that was a very, I mean, it's not a hard and fast rule. But in general it does.

And the reason for that was to open up spaces of learning, which you know, are part of a city's landscape, to the citizens of that place. And I remember when I was starting off with the project, going around to various community centres and mental health day centres and talking to folks and saying, how would you feel about this if it happened in the university rather than here, because we could have done it in the community centres. And the kind of feedback was, I'd be nervous, but it'd be really exciting. And of course, that's how every student feels. Any student feels that. When I did my degree, I was nervous, but excited.

So then the job for people like us is to make sure we help people and navigate through those nerves so they can connect with the excitement of learning with others.

**Nick Rowe**

As you say, that principle has been really important to Converge from the beginning. I mean, it began with a theatre course. And I had seen theatre courses or theatre, or drama groups, for people who've experienced mental health problems in the mental health system often held in rooms which weren't suitable, that kind of devalued the activity.

And so I wanted it to be in a black box space, that had lighting that was taught by people who knew about theatre, that was inside the university, all the messages that would give people. So that whole, the power of place has been central. I was very influenced by Wolfensberger who wrote about normalisation you know, and all that. And this idea of social value, that the best way to challenge prejudice, discrimination, marginalisation is to engage people in places and roles that are socially valued. That really does connect our work together doesn't it?

**Brendan Stone**

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, we both do in our respective projects. I mean, we're talking about, you know, opening the university up to people who wouldn't ordinarily have opportunities to get there. And who might have well thought this was never going to be for them. Have you encountered sort of opposition or difficulties or kind of challenges in doing that?

Very much so. I mean, it's very interesting when you sort of read about I mean, I'm obviously I'm not that knowledgeable about architecture. But through my work, I have read about the ways in which buildings and the design of cities can exclude or include. And it's, it's really interesting when you start opening up spaces to people who felt, well, I shouldn't go in there, and yet those buildings are open, they could have done any time. I mean, it's a personal satisfaction of mine to see the way that people who thought buildings weren't for them gradually become more and more at home within them until it's just a place I go. And that is a wonderful as an educator, someone who works in a university and one of these actually fairly privileged spaces that we inhabit. It's absolutely fantastic to see sometimes some of the norms being destabilised a little bit. And I'm sure that's something that you must see so much.

That's a really interesting question, actually. And not one I was expecting. But it's a good question, because I think my answer would be overtly No. But certainly, I've had administrative challenges, although I have to say, and I need to lay this down as the marker that my work is nowhere near the scale of what you've achieved at York St John, and which has been justly kind of honoured over the years. But nevertheless, as I'm sure you are more familiar with the me, there are usually administrative and bureaucratic issues.

But No, I haven't. I think generally, in the institution I work in people have been sympathetic, and at least on the surface kind of supported it. I think, though, there is something else that is worth mentioning, which is the fact that barriers aren't always visible.

So I think it can be if you're trying to do this sort of work, it can be very insidiously discouraging, when it's patently the case that some of your peers don't value or understand why you're doing what you're doing. Because much as it pains me to admit it, I do think higher education is a generally a deeply conservative environment, you know, we shouldn't change everything, traditions, conventions are important. But life moves on, our thinking moves on, sometimes we do need to move.

So I think that kind of passive resistance can sometimes be a real block to people being bold enough to try something different. Because you know, when you look at the mission statements, and the ways in which universities have measured as well, the idea of bringing people from disadvantaged backgrounds into learn in a university is going to tick all the boxes, you know, “Wow, fantastic.” But then there's that blanking of a project because people don't recognise its value or importance, or don't even respect the fact that somebody may be trying something different. I think one needs to be a little bit resilient to be able to keep going. I'm sure you're a resilient character Nick, I like to think I probably am too.

**Nick Rowe**

No, I think you're absolutely right. I think, perseverance over time. I mean, Converge began as a kind of twilight project happening in the edges of the day when nobody was around, really, and then gradually became noticed. I mean, we had some incidents at the beginning. And I quite understand it, you know, some of the catering staff were contacting security because of somebody who looked like he was homeless in the in the dining room and like, but we sorted that out reasonably quickly. I think, first it was if one wanted to be recognised by the researching academics, then that I wasn't going to get that. And even now, I'm not sure. Because as you said, it's trying something different, isn't it? And so you've got to be prepared to try something different.

But the other thought that went through my mind, of course, is we work in very different universities. This is very small university. You know, don't know how many students are, but it's a small university, very intimate. You can cross it in 10 minutes. Lots of people know each other. That makes a big difference. And so people feel settled in there. Sheffield University, is I imagine much bigger, I guess that makes differences, doesn't it?

**Brendan Stone**

It does and absolutely, I think this is such an important point you raise, which is not all universities are the same. Traditions, histories, ways of working. And actually just the sheer size of universities, radically changes their nature. I mean Sheffield has nearly 30,000 students, eight and a half thousand members of staff, it might be 9000. Now students from 140 plus countries around the world. I mean, one of the things I've always loved about York St John is that intimate close knit feel about it as a community. However, I'm sure that has its downsides too. In a big university, you can kind of get on in a little corner and do your project and really nobody notices so by the time they do notice you've kind of radically changed everything and it's too late for them to put it back.

**Nick Rowe**

I mean, you mentioned some of the key ideas that have driven your work. I mean, are there particular ideas or theories or approaches you find very kind of central to your philosophy of your practice and your work?

**Brendan Stone**

That's a big question. But I guess I would say that my thinking evolves and hopefully develops all the time. There are probably some principles I could articulate which have remained fairly steady. I suppose one of them is to do with actually quite a vexed idea. I don't think it's at all straightforward, certainly not as straightforward as it often is kind of spoken about, which is this idea of the value of personal experience or lived experience as it's now known. Now, I do think that's very important. But I don't think it's simply that because I've had an experience, my view trumps yours. My view is, and some would probably disagree with me, my view is that my experience is part of the knowledge that is available to me. And actually, it's not enough just to have the experience. It's also about reflecting on learning from that experience.

So one of the things I'm incredibly keen on is, in a university, students have the chance to critically reflect on their own learning experience, and actually broadly their own experience, because that's a life skill that's so, so important. We have the experience, but then we have a slight distance from it, look at it as a potential source of knowledge and insight and learning.

One of the key principles that I hope I've always adhered to is experience is valuable, it can be used, negative, positive, whatever, boring, mundane, experience is important. But it needs to be processed through those same skills that we use in any university setting, you know, analysis, critique, synthesis with other ideas. When you start to think like this, you begin to move towards, and it's not a movement, I particularly encourage or want to happen, but it patently there is overlap, the world of kind of therapeutic intervention, because one of the tools that happens in therapy is a space is created in which people have enough distance from experience to reevaluate it, reassess it, make different connections and tell a different story. That's the other thing that I'm really interested in. And it comes from my interest in narrative and identity, I suppose, and narrative and life if you like, which is that I think one of the great battles for people who have experienced really disabling mental distress is to somehow find the resources and support to be able to construct a story that feels comfortable enough for them to live within. A way of processing their own, sometimes quite frightening experiences, but being able to have a kind of a framework within which they can live and grow and develop. And that does not mean that therefore all the so called symptoms will have disappeared, it points towards a belief that a meaningful life is possible, and actually is probably our right, even when we still are sometimes plagued by whatever the symptoms might be.

I mean, in terms of theorists and writers, there are so many really and it's funny, I was having a conversation on social media with someone the other night and they were saying in mental health, what are the key writers who have influenced you and I put a list of novelists down. People like WG Sebald, who wrote books like Austerlitz. JG Ballard, Ron Butlin. I, quite often... my understandings of humanity grow through novels far more than they do from - or poetry - far more than they do from the stuff that I'm supposed to read. I mean, I guess Foucault was a big influence on me, in my view, Foucault was a deeply flawed person who wrote some amazing stuff, some really challenging incredible stuff, and it kind of opened up certain avenues of thought for me. But yeah, I guess my heroes have probably lost some of their sheen in the last few years. So I kind of feel now like we're all down together trying to make sense of what's often a very confusing and difficult existence.

**Nick Rowe**

I was thinking for myself while I like the idea of lived experience, but lived experience that has been reflected upon, and one way that one reflects upon one's experiences through the arts. And for me, I suppose through theatre particularly and that theatre - the first time we ever met was through playback theatre - is one of the ways in which we can reflect upon our experience through the arts. And what has really interested me and I've said it a number of times is that I worked in the Faculty of Health for a lot of years at York St John. When I moved to the Faculty of Arts, it was only then that I had the freedom to play. Nobody was stopping me. But something about the psychic freedom, the space, the allowance to begin to dream something and to make something happen. And the arts, there's a long tradition in the arts of valuing story, and experience, over a disembodied academic thinking.

**Brendan Stone**

That's so true. What you've just said, is a truism. But it's one that we need to keep repeating. When you said it, I was like god, yes, of course. I was talking a few days ago with one of my current students. And I'm teaching a module on the uncanny, on Freud's theory of the uncanny, using various novels, well novellas actually, as illustrations of what this strange essay might be pointing towards, and I give them an opportunity to either write in a conventional academic way about the subjects of the course, or they can use creative means. And we were discussing, I think she was a little bit unsure about why she would use a creative method to explore the ideas in the course. But she'd sent me a sample of her writing, and it was fantastic.

So I was kind of trying to encourage her but also not sway her choice. And, and I kind of said, more or less what you've just said, which is, well, the way I see it is that creative approach is just another way of exploring ideas and feelings. And it's got a different set of tools and methods to do so. I really think that is so so critical. It's fascinating to me that you made that switch and noticed the difference. As you implied, it often is a cultural difference. In the social sciences, in health sciences, there is more emphasis these days on narrative. But when one moves into the arts, the way in which we approach stories, the way in which we use the knowledge and insight we might gain from stories, it just is different.

**Nick Rowe**

Oh, I agree. Just wondering, do you think you know, because we're talking about social justice, mental health and our education, are we saying that in order to promote social justice in a university lived experience, must be valued and reflected upon, and that is a crucial characteristic, and vehicle, to allow social justice?

**Brendan Stone**

That's such an interesting thought. And I'd certainly not made that connection, I kind of feel very sympathetic to what you've just said. Because actually, you know, lived experience tends to be used as a term in situations where we are thinking about issues like mental ill health, or racism. But actually, as an idea, it applies to all of us, it really does apply to all of us. And the idea of encouraging learners to value their own individual feelings and reactions and experiences as they learn and then to reflect on that, as a tool for personal development is such a powerful one. I would agree with it. Absolutely.

I mean, patently one of the things that one would want learners to reflect on is the fact that we don't all start at the same place when we come to education, people because of conditions of injustice, because of what might have happened to them, because of various challenges that they have encountered, means that it's not a level playing field. I think we kind of find ourselves at a time when there are these so called culture wars going on, in which we often feels like you've got two sides throwing rocks at each other. And actually, one of the things that education can do, I think, is connect people with their own thoughts and feelings in such a way that it becomes hard to hide from the realities of injustice and inequality. Because when one connects with those facts at a felt emotional level, genuinely it becomes harder to just brush them aside.

So I guess, when we talk about social justice in higher education, all sorts of alarm bells start ringing for me, because I sadly I do follow a lot of the kind of debates both political and social on social media and elsewhere, and social justice has become a kind of battleground really. Actually what we're talking about is respect for others and respect for ourselves and finding ways to empathise with the experience of someone who's not like us, with the advantages that we might have had, if we do have advantages, to trying to inhabit a world that is different to ours and imagine what it might be like to be in that situation.

I think if we find a way, through reflection on personal experience and also reflection on what it might be like to be someone else, to have a different set of experiences, there is the potential anyway for education to have a real role in - and this is going to sound a little bit cheesy - but in healing what often feels like an increasingly divided world, which is desperately sad, I think many of us feel that at the moment.

**Nick Rowe**

I've been using the phrase for a number of years about the ambition I have for York St John, which is to turn the university inside out. If you imagine a university sort of clustered around a quad, could imagine in your mind that all the buildings turn outwards, away from the quad and out into the city. I know you're professor for public engagement and social engagement. And I know that's a really important principle for you isn't it. The engaged University or whatever phrase we want to use for it.

**Brendan Stone**

A lovely image. There's a part of me, which loves that inward lookingness of York St John, but that's probably revealing too much about my own deep insecurities, then you want to know. Absolutely, I mean, universities should face outwards, the doors should be open. And that's because our core mission is education. And education is a fundamentally democratic enterprise in which citizens learn, not only from the books in libraries, but also from each other. And that business of learning from each other is probably for me, the most critical function of education, in which we understand actually that the same theme can be approached from a variety of perspectives, and that those perspectives are often shaped by the difference in lived experience that has led that learner up to that point.

**Nick Rowe**

Learning environments which enable that to happen. So imagine you're not a great fan of lectures.

**Brendan Stone**

Yeah, I mean, I have to say that I'm not a great fan of it. My thinking on this has changed slightly in the last few months, because obviously, we've had all the restrictions because of the coronavirus pandemic. And like most universities, all of our didactic content we've recorded and delivered remotely, I haven't done enough thinking on this yet.

But a colleague of mine emailed me today, actually, and was just reflecting a little bit in his email about the difference that had opened up through this online lecture world that we find ourselves in. Because actually, there are all sorts of ways in which one can vary and change the format of didactic content, one can make it more interactive for a start, but one can also split it up into little chunks. I know I'm a professor, but my attention span is about three and a half minutes. So my ideal lecture would have been certainly no longer than five minutes. I've been quite surprised, actually, this term, when I've been teaching, that as I talked to my students about whatever that week's theme is, they've patently taken the time to listen to and think about the recorded things that I put out there before I actually meet with them. And I don't know that that would have been exactly the case, when we were doing traditional lectures.

So I don't know I mean, I do think the traditional lecture format is well past its sell by date, where you've got the kind of learned and probably over earnest professor at the front pontificating and there's a lecture theatre full of 400 silent doffing their forelocks. But we should learn a little bit from the world of YouTube and other video hosting services. You know, what makes something watchable, I don't mean that we should all start being horribly and clunkily fashionable in an attempt to make young people like us, but we maybe need to vary a little bit of style, and a video when you're recording it in a room on your own. When naturally it's more informal and discursive if then you wouldn't be in a big lecture theatre. If you can make it slightly more dialogic perhaps students will actually listen.

**Nick Rowe**

Thank you very much, Brendan. It's been fantastic speaking to about your work and sharing our experiences together. I'm really grateful for it and I hope this is one of many conversations you and I will have in the future.

**Brendan Stone**

Good luck to you, Nick. And good luck to York St John, which has a very fond place in my affection, and I'll see you soon.

**Nick Rowe**

Hopefully soon we'll see each other face to face.