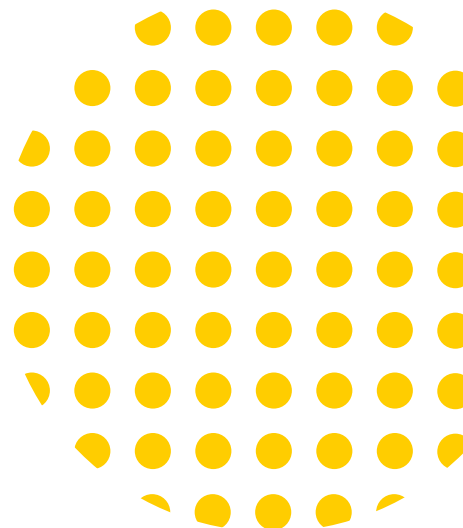
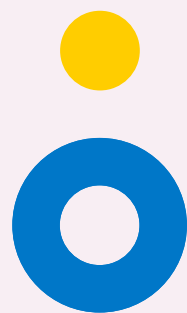


# (De)constructing solidarity for international youth work:

critical education,  
pedagogy of discomfort  
and civic engagement



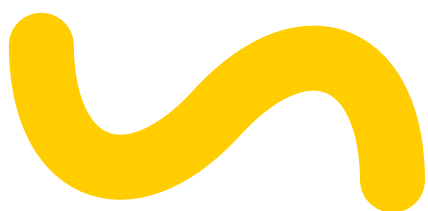
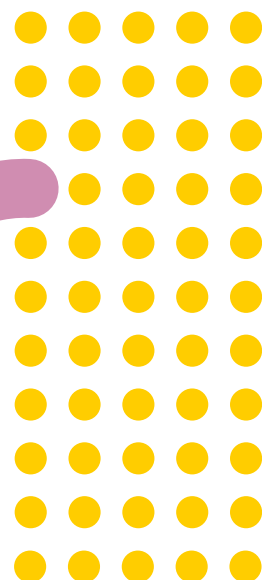
SOLIDARITY • PEDAGOGY OF DISCOMFORT  
• INTERNATIONAL • YOUTH WORK • CIVIC  
ENGAGEMENT


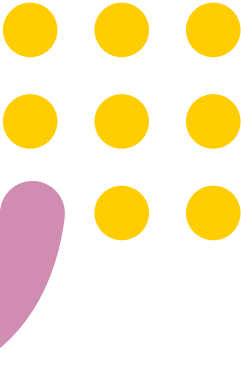




## Jovana Skrijel

Jovana is an international youth trainer, educator and activist. Over the past decade she's initiated and led a series of educational events addressing justice and human rights related questions through art, experiential learning, storytelling, action and play. She lives in Germany, where she teaches and works on her PhD project. Her research represents a critical approach to moving the utopian vision of radical, cosmopolitan solidarity toward transformative practice and impact. At the moment she is reflecting upon the role of emotions, affect, context, ideology, and power in transformational learning processes, and is happy to discuss these and related questions with fellow practitioners and wonderers.





If you have come  
here to help me,  
you are wasting your time.  
But if you have come  
because your liberation  
is bound up with mine,  
then let us work together.

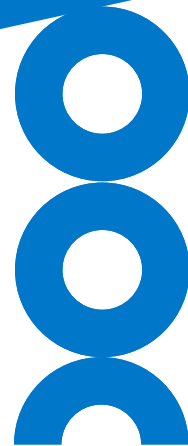
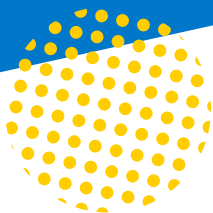
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LILLA WATSON

## ABSTRACT

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The paper examines the idea of solidarity by looking closer into its political and rights-based dimension. It introduces the transformative potential of critical education and its role in turning educational spaces into an impetus of social awareness, responsibility and civic engagement. Finally, it reflects upon the pedagogy of discomfort and its significance in mediating the questions of oppression, injustice and solidarity within international youth work.

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## 1. Why Should Europe Talk Solidarity

At a time when almost 70 million people worldwide have been forced to flee their homes due to; war, human rights violations, climate change and natural disasters... a united Europe, once imagined as the embodiment of transnational solidarity, is needed more than ever.

Instead, we are witnessing stricter migration policies, crackdowns on irregular migration, the rise of right wing politics and movements, the spread of anti-immigrant sentiments, an intensifying xenophobia, racism and hate crimes. Exceptional acts of civic courage and humanitarian assistance to those in distress, have been increasingly stigmatized and discouraged, and in many cases even criminalised.

Next to the vocal, the political and the involved, be they helpers or bullies, are the “silent spectators”. This is the general population whose lives are often far away from one of the most concerning issues of today’s Europe. Many are indifferent, others feel overwhelmed or helpless when confronted with such massive injustice and suffering. As the years of “the crisis” pass by, the images of the new fences, police brutality, deaths of people smuggled in unseaworthy boats, and the catastrophes that continue to unfold in warring countries are becoming our “new normality”, the one which rapidly shrinks the hope for societies once envisioned

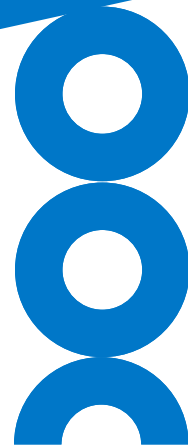
through the founding values of European Union. This new normality, often framed as the “refugee crises” translates to a crisis of democracy, a crisis of human rights and ultimately a crisis of solidarity.

The central concern of this paper is therefore, the notion of solidarity. Solidarity is one of the key words that constantly appears in all “crisis” related discourses and yet it is too often disassociated from the concept of individual responsibility. While being concerned that the spirit of solidarity has either been overwhelmed by indifference or saved for exclusive circles of activists, this paper aims to understand how we can think of and ultimately forge the culture of solidarity in the context of increasingly heterogeneous European societies, hindered by growing divisions of far right politics. In particular, how solidarity is and how it should be imagined and employed in the face of this “crisis” in today’s Europe, and how significant is the role of international youth work.

## 2. How Should Europe Talk Solidarity

Solidarity is a very commonly used term – we hear it in the rhetoric of social movements, media, academia, and within political, educational, cultural and other organisations. The term is both over-used and misused (Sholtz 2008) and, as explored and emphasised in the 4Thought for Solidarity research (Baclija Knoch and Nicodemi 2020), its



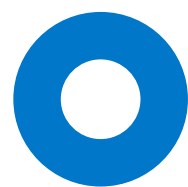
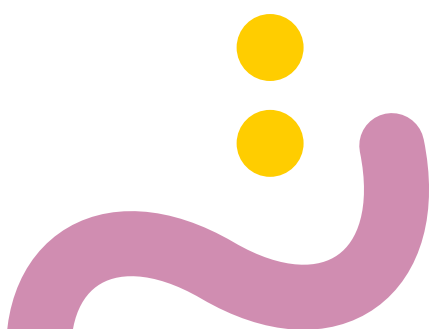


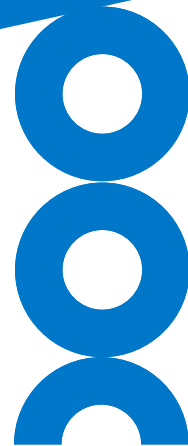
common use involves diverse intentions and definitions. Like many other ideological concepts, it has no intrinsic meaning nor is it defined in a binding manner. It changes, and is being redefined and given meaning through struggles about what its proper content should be. Indeed, the term has been promoted by a number of rival movements such as Marxism, Social Democracy, French Solidarism, Liberalism, Roman Catholicism and even neo-Fascism (Stjerno 2013). Since we understand that the concepts of solidarity were developed under specific historic circumstances and constructed socially under different political and ideological constellations, it is necessary to understand how the concept is seen, used, understood and communicated in today's Europe. Moreover, this should not only be a theoretical quest; our particular concern should be what solidarity means to those in need. How is solidarity perceived by those who found themselves outside the circles of safety, dignity and protection? The oppressed, underprivileged and excluded. But before we make such an attempt, let us take another step back and try to understand the very phenomena and its various facets.

### 3. Solidarity: Multidimensional, Limited and Contested

Solidarity is one of the key phenomena often studied in the social sciences. Research can be found in sociology, communication, political sciences, and psychology, among others. Such studies have been examining the forms and conditions of social integration and cohesion in order to better understand what it is that keeps societies together (Durkheim 1893; Marshall 1950; Parsons 1966). Various researches, as have been carefully illustrated within the 4Thought study, have made differentiation between numerous levels of solidary relations, responsibilities and obligations. At the macro-level, this is the social structures of society, the constitutional, institutional and discursive construction of solidarity; at the meso-level, or organisational fields, solidarity is seen as a collective effort promoted by civil society organisations and social movements; and finally at the micro-level, it is the interpersonal relations of mutual support between individuals (Lahusen and Grasso 2018).

Shared identities and increasing interdependencies are identified as the most important precondition for growing solidarity among the states and citizens (Lahusen 2016). When it comes to the development of stable forms of transnational solidarity within the EU, recent debates have been rather pessimistic, particularly because "the crisis" seems to undermine the societal and institutional foundations of European solidarity



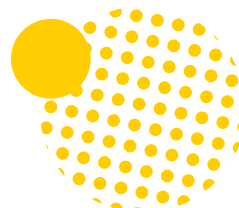


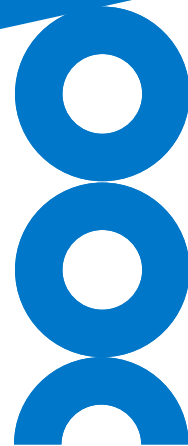
(Stjerno 2012; Lahusen and Grasso 2018). Most of the studies point to the political and constitutional preconditions for the development of a transnational or universalistic solidarity (Brunkhorst 1997, 2005; Habermas 2013). They highlight the need for democratically grounded and transnationally knitted European citizenship as an important building block for solidarity - one that transcends national divisions and discriminations (e.g. Balibar 2014; Dobson 2012).

Next to these theoretical considerations, empirical research in social sciences mostly attempts to identify measurable indicators of solidarity. Welfare states and social policies are seen here as institutionalised forms of wealth redistribution and collective solidarity (Alesina and Giuliano 2011; Rehm et al 2012). However, approval of social policies does not always mirror individual readiness to support the others. Contributions to social security programmes are compulsory and general support for the welfare states does not always translate to solidarity relations with specific groups of needy people (Lahusen 2016; ed. Lahusen and Grasso 2018). The studies that investigate civil societies and social movements, seeing the two as forces that mobilise, organise and stabilise solidarity, point out the importance of resources and collective identities. They argue that the mobilisation of collective actions and social movements across borders, depends on the capability to awaken the feeling of identification and solidarity (Giugni and Passi 2001; Porta and Caiani 2011; Lahusen and

Grasso 2018). They also emphasise that solidarity is a contested issue, claiming that in-group solidarity might often imply out-group enmity. An example would be the populist narratives on behalf of exclusive, national communities, claiming that solidarity with poor compatriots comes before solidarity with outsiders (Lahusen and Grasso 2018). Solidarity is, therefore, constantly constructed and reproduced through public narratives, ideologies and discourses (Beyerz 1999; Scholz 2008), and in times of crisis group solidarities are prioritised (Stjerno 2012; Lahusen and Grasso 2018).

Finally, analysis interested in forms of interpersonal help and support have tried to determine the factors that help in explaining interpersonal solidarity. This has been done by naming the conditions of interpersonal help and support, such as interpersonal trust and social networks, and pointing out the necessary ingredients of social cohesion (Jeannotte 2000; Putnam 2003). In explanatory terms, scholars have tended to confirm the importance of subjective perceptions of deservingness, values and belief-systems, political allegiances, religion and loyalties to ethnic groups (Lahusen and Grasso 2018). Here too, scholars have insisted





on the fact that solidarity might involve group closure, pointing out the fact that individuals tend to limit their relations of trust, reciprocity and solidarity to a reduced number of strong ties and intimate relations. This is at the expense of the wider social environment of engagement (Putnam 2000; Stjerno 2012).

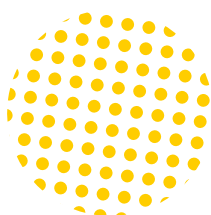
Our task then, or utopian ideal if you will, is to seek the ways to transcend those limits. If we want to move solidarity beyond the thick ties of belonging and inherited deservingness, towards the one where everyone would act for the greater good of everyone, we need to recognise inequalities and human rights violations. We need to reach a state where we would feel compelled to act in solidarity with those who are facing injustices, no matter who those others are. But before we explore that further, let's take another step back and try to understand what kind of solidarity it is that would enable us to do this.

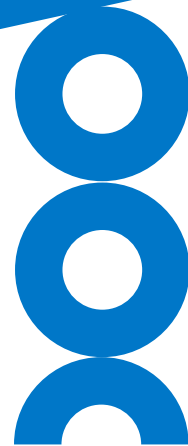
## 4. Conceptual Matters or What Solidarity is Not

Paris, I'm not  
a humanitarian. I am  
not there to 'aid'. I stand  
with you in solidarity. We do  
not need medals. We do not need  
authorities deciding about who is  
a 'hero' and who is 'illegal'. In  
fact they are in no position to  
make this call, because we are  
all equal.

LIA KLEMP  
CAPTAIN OF ITALIAN REFUGEE  
RESCUE SHIP

A conceptual and theoretical framework requires a clear definition of solidarity and its differentiation with interchangeably used concepts such as altruism, empathy, compassion, care and charity. Academic inquiries too often focus on (financial) help to the needy, thus highlighting the charitable dimension of solidarity. While this aspect should not be overlooked, it has been noted that giving it too much focus downplays the political and rights-based dimension of solidarity. This is the active involvement of others in the situation of

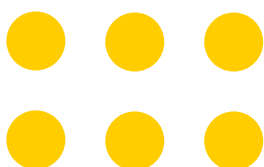




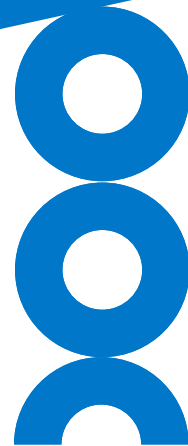
the affected group by mobilising on behalf of their rights and entitlements (Giugni and Passy 2001; Scholz 2008). This dimension is particularly important if we speak about the social groups at the fringes of society that are severely impacted by “the crisis” (Giugni and Grasso 2018). In this sense the 4Thought study has made a significant contribution by envisioning the new model of solidarity that has not overlooked the political and rights-based dimension of solidarity, but it actually recognises it as the very core of solidarity. It identifies human rights, active citizenship and inclusion as cornerstones of solidarity, and empathy remains recognised as crucial. We can clearly see that solidarity is not only a matter of philanthropic help between individuals but also of reciprocal expectations and actions among people expressing togetherness and inclusiveness. It presupposes the existence of (imagined) communities with some sort of ‘membership’ implying responsibilities for the others (Stjernø 2012). Indeed, responsibility, support, active participation, strengthening communities, and equality of opportunity were, next to volunteering and social justice, recognised by a significant number of 4Thought respondents, as concepts complementary to solidarity.

Similarly, while putting a strong emphasis on the political dimension, this paper insists on the feminist and post-colonial approaches to solidarity as well. This supports the conceptualising of solidarity as a way of combating injustice and oppression suffered by specific groups or communities, on whose behalf individuals or organisations speak up (Bayertz, 1999; Gould 2004; Scholz 2008;). Solidarity next to a moral disposition presupposes also a social critique. The attention to institutional structures and injustices and an active reflection upon one's own role in the reproduction of existing inequalities is just as important as understanding the socio-political engagement that aims at just relations. While the related concepts of care or empathy have been thought to be ineluctably limited to specific others, solidarity as understood here entails “a readiness to establish broader interrelations with a range of others who share in a situation of being oppressed or exploited or who, more generally, are suffering through no fault of their own” (Gould 2004).

Solidarity actions can be then seen as demonstrations of the conviction that others’ freedoms are the preconditions for our own freedom. (Von Kotze and Walters 2017) Scholarly writing has tended to privilege attitudinal dispositions, meaning understanding in which circumstances people would be ready or not to share some of their resources with others (Stjernø 2012). It is of immense importance however, to look into what actually prompts solidarity behaviours, in particular those behaviours





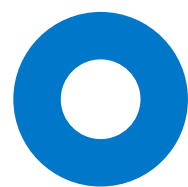
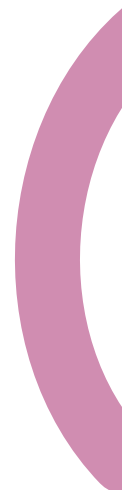
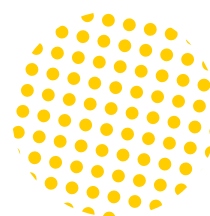


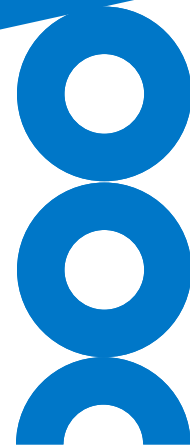
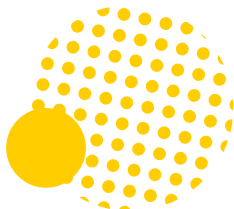
which surpass charitable actions and involve social critique and political engagement. In addition, social psychology has demonstrated that attitudes do not necessarily transform into action, particularly if individual costs or structural obstacles are involved (Lahusen 2016). While keeping that in mind, we further need to think of the conditions under which solidary attitudes translate to active engagements that improve the lot of others.

## 5. Can Solidarity be Cultivated and How: Solidarity as Mediated Cosmopolitanism

The limits of solidarity and its contested nature are rightly recognised by various respondents of the 4Thought research. They felt that society is becoming increasingly polarised and divided and that there is a need to enhance networks and relations in order to seek solutions that go beyond these divisions. Furthermore, they acknowledged that solidarity cannot be forced and that the wish to act in solidarity has to be felt. The impulse to act in solidarity comes rather naturally when our family and friends are in question, however, the weaker the ties with the others, the less triggered we are to act on their behalf. Indeed, the main solidarity related question, the one largely left out as an issue of empirical concern, is how can this global, cosmopolitan or universal solidarity can be cultivated?

Many contemporary thinkers have tried to answer the question of what moves people to act in the name of others and how to build strong relationships across national, political, cultural and ethnic boundaries. Most agree that communication and interaction are the main preconditions for solidarity (Appiah 2006; Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994; Habermas 2003; Parsons 1951; Stjernø 2012). So the more familiarity, the more interaction. The more communication, the more understanding. The more understanding, the greater the ties and therefore the stronger the solidarity.

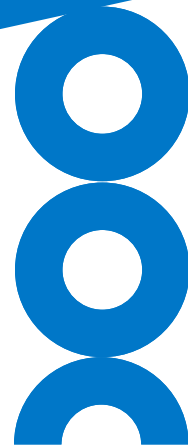




Jürgen Habermas, one of the most important German philosophers and highly influential thinker, claimed that universal solidarity, the one that does not exclude those distant and unknown others, is conditioned upon ever-wider discourses where all individuals take the perspective of all the others. In other words, solidarity requires us to really look into each other's realities and try to understand the multiple ways in which they condition our everyday lives and struggles. Although Habermas insisted that nobody should be excluded from universal solidarity, it is not easy to see how solidarity could be extended to those who are not part of the discourse (Stjernø 2012). In this context it means the ones with whom we do not interact, whose stories remain untold and unknown to us and who do not have the opportunity to voice out their struggles. Scholars working on the intersections of media and critical cosmopolitanism, explored how the performance of the media, at the occurrence of mass suffering events, informs solidarity and interconnectedness. This was explored on a cosmopolitan level and in the context of turning another's pain recognition into action (Chouliaraki 2011; Orgad 2012; Silverstone 2006). If we witness the stories of the others, the everyday obstacles they face to live in dignity and safety, if we get a closer insight in their life-struggles and hear their stories... will that actually move us to act towards the betterment of their lives? And if yes, in which ways?

In this sense, the studies also addressed the internet's capacity to facilitate a meaningfully inclusive space where distant others, not only geographically but also culturally, politically, sociologically and historically, are heard, honoured and cared for (Orgad 2012; Silverstone 2006). It is true that many people are involved in common transnational spaces of mutual information. Discourses and deliberations about solidarities transcend nationally structured mass-media systems and permeate various public spheres. However, many have warned about the danger of the digital divide and the selectivity and distortion of media realities. Cosmopolitanism as a form of global solidarity and the need to transcend received loyalties and attachments in favour of imagining distant unknown others, is seen as rather elusive and vulnerable, dependent on media representation and conditioned by cultural biases and interpretations (Kyriakidou, 2008). So again the questions arise - whose voices are heard in dominant media and how loud? Who is represented and who is not and why? Who remains excluded, time after time, and why do certain stories get prioritised over others. Media scholars have also made us conscious of the ways in which social media and hyper-connectivity do not only diminish conditions but also reshape our experience of solidarity. They warn us about "the spectacle of suffering", "commodifying of suffering", and the passive quasi participation of "digital sympathising", "politics of pity" and "ironic solidarity". All these place the pleasures of the self at the heart of moral action, at the expense of





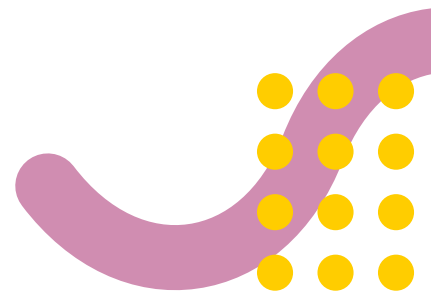
reflexive engagement with the political conditions of human vulnerability (Boltanski 2004; Chouliaraki 2012; Orgad 2012; Silverstone 2006).

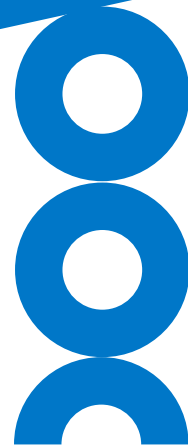
While relying on self-expression, this new media solidarity marginalises the voices of the vulnerable and deprives us of a moral discourse that would link vulnerability to justice (Chouliaraki 2011; Orgad 2012). It still creates a feeling of participation in us, which consequently often gives rise to a feeling of self-satisfaction which can make us passive. The desire to engage in a specific action can diminish rapidly. Often where there are no direct acts of assistance to those under threat, i.e. practical solidarity and empathy, there are also no genuine forms of human understanding. The risk that solidarity might become just another skill to be acquired in order to enrich a CV has also been recognized by 4Thought research. There was a feeling that many young people were just focused on themselves, their own altruistic experiences and the development of their competences.

Finally, next to media scholarship which continues to explore the media capacity to meaningfully facilitate an inclusive space where the distant others are heard, we, the educational proponents and practitioners of international youth work have long ago recognised the potential of education to turn practical interconnectedness into a relationship-based awareness of the world. We have hoped that, with the right pedagogic approaches, educational spaces can turn into an impetus of social awareness,

responsibility and civic engagement (Horvat and Davis 2011; Keith 2010; Gaztambide-Fernández 2012). The number of educational initiatives devoted to the promotion of peace, human rights, intercultural awareness, democracy and active citizenship have been carefully developed and reassessed to promote solidarity among young people. With the European Solidarity Corps this concern to recognise solidarity as one of the key values in international youth work has been articulated more clearly than ever. Yet we still have a long journey ahead, the evidence of what makes our practice effective remains inconclusive.

Therefore, while trying to answer the questions of how and where can solidarity be cultivated, this paper aims to rethink the conditions under which venues of non-formal education could convert into venues of transformative learning. A venue that would lead to meaningful social action, increased social cohesion and solidarity. To explore this, the paper will explore critical pedagogy, more specifically, it will give a further insight into the potential and the challenges of pedagogies of solidarity in international youth work.



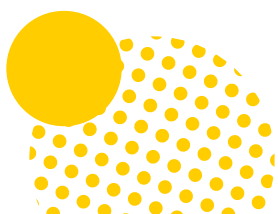


## 6. Towards Pedagogies of Solidarity

International youth work and non-formal educational methods and approaches significantly draw on philosophy of education and a social movement called critical pedagogy. This movement has applied concepts from critical theory and related traditions to the field of education and the study of culture. Advocates of critical pedagogy argue that teaching is an inherently political act, and insist that issues of social justice and democracy are not distinct from acts of teaching and learning (Freire 2005; Gaztambide-Fernández 2012). The goal of critical pedagogy is to awaken the critical consciousness, which encourages individuals to affect change in their world through social critiquing and political action. Critical pedagogy sees educational spaces as spaces of ‘radical imagination’, spaces which ask learners to consider a broad multitude of points that might have shaped their values, attitudes and beliefs. The pedagogical space is seen as a space which disrupts knowledge production and consumption, while opening up the imagination of the world beyond the self, and asking learners to be accountable for and respond to the call of the other. It invites them to ethically engage with others, otherness and justice inside and outside of the learning venues.

In Paulo Freire’s (1970/2005) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, solidarity is seen as a key aspect of how “oppressors” come into liberatory relationships with the “oppressed”. For Freire, one of the biggest proponents of progressive education, solidarity entails the recognition that liberation is a collective project that requires dialogic participation and a critical consciousness of how both oppressor and oppressed are bound together through power relations (Freire 2005; Gaztambide-Fernández 2012). In order to understand better how critical pedagogy contributes to understanding solidarity from the perspective of oppression rather than a position of privilege, we turn to the lenses of critical racial, feminist and postcolonial studies and come closer to what several authors have named as the pedagogy of solidarity.

While making a valuable contribution to the topic, Gaztambide-Fernández, invites learners to think of solidarity relationally and to ask questions such as; “how am I being made by others?” “What are the consequences of my being on others?” (Gaztambide-Fernández 2012). In practical terms to follow this questioning would mean to question the influence of own everyday being and actions on the well-being of others. Starting for example with what and how we consume, to which injustices we remain blind to, which negative practices we unconsciously support and/or reproduce, etc.





At the same time, we are invited to reconsider how knowledge production about others and otherness is complicit in maintaining the status quo in our societies (Scarry 1998). If, for instance, an identity group is constantly portrayed as less deserving, if they are dehumanised, underrepresented, misrepresented, invisible or unheard, this would have consequences on their treatment, inclusion, protection and solidarity related deservingness. This questioning then looks at inequality as the basis of present being rather than as an accident of present conditions. It then asks how is this mythology of me, “us and them”, the result of unequal circumstances and injustice (Gaztambide-Fernández 2012).

In addition, Gaztambide-Fernández points to another important quality of solidarity, claiming that it has to be transitive, as it “requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is in solidary; it is a radical posture... true solidarity with the oppressed means fighting at their side to transform the objective reality which has made them these ‘beings for another’” (Freire 1970). In this sense, it is central to understand the pedagogy of solidarity as a term of engagement - as a praxis, it is not merely about entering into a state of solidarity - just to be in solidarity! More importantly, “the pedagogy of solidarity is about an action that also affects or modifies the one who acts - to solidarize oneself with.” In this sense, a pedagogy of solidarity opposes common expressions of solidarity that basically work to excuse or ignore the complicity of ongoing injustices. It

rejects the kind of quasi-solidarity of “celebrity humanitarianism” or what Lilie Chouliaraki describes as, “a practice of voyeuristic altruism [that] reproduces the moral distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’”. It opposes the kind of “ironic solidarity” in which solidarity becomes “a matter of self-empowerment” through which “the idealised Western subject improves his humanity at the expense of the suffering of others” (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009; Razack 1998). To think of solidarity as a transitive verb means to underline its demands that we act in the world. This acting in the world presumes the idea of praxis as developed by Freire (1970), an act is informed by thinking about the world and by reflecting on action and, of course, reflecting as action. (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009). But it still remains unclear what prompts us to act?

## 7. Pedagogy of Discomfort: Vulnerability, Alliances, Radical Co-presence and Acting

If solidarity is to be relational and transitive it must begin from the premise that this process “is an uneasy, reserved, and unsettled matter that neither reconciles present grievances nor forecloses future conflict” (Zembylas and Boler 2002). The pedagogy of solidarity is therefore by no exception effective. It invites educators and students to engage in critical inquiry regarding inherited values and cherished beliefs and the ways those are promoted. Within this culture of inquiry, as

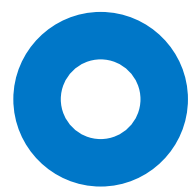




Megan Boler argues, a central focus is to recognise how emotions define how and what one chooses to see, and conversely, not to see. She calls this the pedagogy of discomfort, because this process is “fraught with emotional landmines.” (Zembylas and Boler 2002) The emotions that often arise in the process of inhabiting various senses of self are defensive anger, fear of change, and fears of losing one’s personal and cultural identities (Zembylas and Boler 2002). Many trainers and youth workers, who within their work address structural injustices, (mis)representations, othering, exclusion and other related topics, understand the discomfoting process of unlearning, for example: addressing the oppression of women through male privileges or the oppression of people of colour through white privileges.

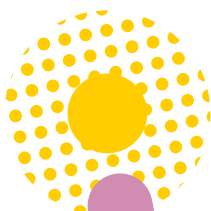
This emotional dimension of pedagogy of solidarity or ‘affective solidarity’, emerges from the ‘affective dissonance’, which includes all sorts of disturbing emotions as well as the desire for connection. The “affective dissonance” or what some of the proponents of service learning call “disorienting dilemma”, is what is needed to experience “perspective transformation” or significant change in the ways learners understand their identity, culture, and behaviour (Mezirow 2000). The dissonance is a critical insight that acts as a trigger that can, under certain conditions, (i.e. opportunities for reflection and dialogue, openness to change, etc.), lead people to engage in a transformational learning process. This is where previously

taken-for-granted assumptions - values, beliefs, and lifestyle habits - are assessed and in some cases radically transformed (Kiely 2005). It is always emotional and without exception uncomfortable but by all means needed. Think of the learning process of a young person, who grew up in Germany, Belgium or France, and is about to start a one-year long volunteering project in a “developing country” in Africa, a former colony of their homeland. They are motivated to learn, to help the less fortunate and to understand their lives. On one of the preparation seminars, they will be confronted with critical racial studies, they will explore the ideas of critical whiteness, tackle racial macro-aggressions, whitesplaining, white saviour complex, post-colonial theories, and development critique, etc. They will not only read about these topics, they will listen to and witness the stories of people coming from their future service country, hear their stories and their perspectives. Entering such dialogues, engaging in listening and telling stories would involve critical self-reflexivity and the decolonising work of all those in privileged positions based on radical vulnerability.



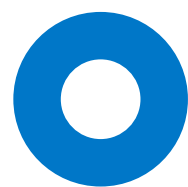


This young person will maybe for the first time, start to think about how colonialism was portrayed in their schooling, if it was even questioned or not. They will maybe discuss with their peers if this topic was ever discussed in their family and in which tone. They will look deeper into how the communities they will soon be joining were portrayed in the media and in charity campaigns. Did they hear them speaking? What were they speaking about? Their peers from Rwanda, Senegal or Nigeria would tell them, about the stories they grew up with, the mythologies and ideas about Europe or the West in general. It might be overwhelming. Some realisations might come with anger, shame or guilt, but they would also, if properly addressed, include justice, equality of opportunity and solidarity. Each word has so many vivid meanings, in all their messiness and complexity, social, historical and political conditioning, in which we all play a part.



This person would then soon after go on their one year long journey, conscious of the danger of the single story (Chimamanda Adichi). They will let the other stories fill and further transform their meanings, they will be open to unlearn, relearn, to be radically vulnerable and co-present. This radical vulnerability, this openness to 'the other' is, as Jan Masschelein observes, not only about being aware of how our perspective and social location shapes our worldview, but involves a radical co-presence and the 'expos[ing] of ourselves' and our ignorance (Masschelein 2010).

Within relations of feminist decolonising solidarity, being taught by the other, making mistakes and receiving feedback, is fundamental (Walters and Butterwick 2016; Masschelein 2010). Furthermore, a pedagogy of discomfort goes beyond concern for individualised self-reflection and emphasises "collective witnessing", that is, a collectivised engagement in learning to see, feel, and act differently. This collective witnessing recognises the contingency of one's subjectivities and fosters the various emotions of (dis)comfort without ending up creating a celebratory emotional culture in the learning space. The collective emphasis is essential in recognising that how we see ourselves and want to see ourselves, is inextricably intertwined with others. Simultaneously, a pedagogy of discomfort calls not only for critical understanding but also for action that is a result of learning to become a "witness" and not simply a "spectator" (Walters and Butterwick 2016).







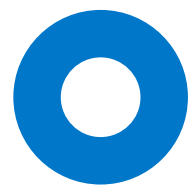
It is important to note that the discomfoting process of unlearning might create a variety of disturbing emotions in those who are initially unwilling to acknowledge that the pain, misery and injustices are caused by unequal social structures. We often lack awareness of our own contributions in reproducing or maintaining the status quo of such social realities. Such disturbing emotions need to be handled with care and the learning process facilitated in a way that the disorienting dilemmas eventually do transform into learning insights and a motivation to act. Youth workers who address rather sensitive topics, early on become conscious of the meaning of comfort, stretch and panic zones within the learning process. We have been taught to encourage learners to leave their comfort zones and stretch beyond the familiar, but to keep them safe from the panic zone. In the panic zone learning gives way to stress, revolt and might in some cases even (re)traumatise an individual and so make participants retreat to their comfort zones.

As a youth worker and trainer with over a decade of experience in dealing with rather sensitive topics, I'd say we have been taught about the zones for a reason. However, I cannot help but wonder at how well we are navigating this liminal space between the comfort and panic zones. If we are addressing creative disturbances too fast, do we do it at the expense of genuine understanding? Can we address the extremely uncomfortable political conditions of others in a relational and reflexive manner? Can we witness it and take responsibility

for it, while avoiding and dismantling the unpleasant feelings of discomfort? If the spectatorship of suffering and learning about the other is to be replaced with learning with the other through witnessing, "radical vulnerability" and "co-presenting", we need to get more comfortable with the discomfort of unlearning. We need to welcome and embrace the ranges of rather uncomfortable emotions into the pedagogic venues.

## 8. Can International Youth Work Accommodate Pedagogies of Solidarity?

As an ideological concept, solidarity has no intrinsic meaning, it changes, and is being redefined and given meanings under specific historic circumstances and different political and ideological constellations. If we accept the notion that solidarity has no intrinsic value, but rather that its meaning gets renegotiated discursively, politically and through practice, then youth work plays a crucial role in such negotiation processes. The European Solidarity Corps, and in particular the numerous training courses, seminars and international youth exchanges supported through it, not only open up an opportunity for us to reimagine solidarity but make it our duty to forge it so it works for fairness, equality, justice and integrity.





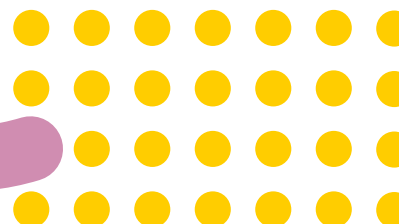
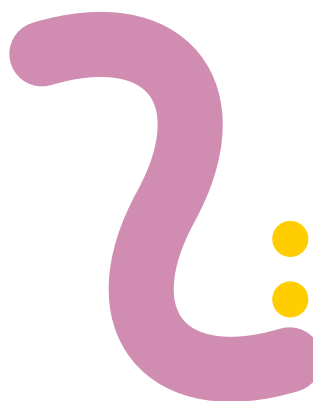


To make it happen, the complexity of our learning venues need to match the complexity of the world. We need to welcome the messiness and complexity of solidarity, and understand how alliances require a deep commitment to critique, grounded in the historical, geographical and political contingencies of a given struggle. We need to rethink our approaches to learning in non-formal education and try to reconceive our learning venues, which are too often perceived and even expected to be the places of comfort and fun.

“Solidarities are difficult. Cultivating radical vulnerabilities involves grappling with the material and symbolic politics of our own social locations (decolonising the self)” (Walters and Butterwick 2016). Unlearning is sometimes anything but fun. Dealing with the past, understanding racism or homophobia through critical lenses is not an easy process. Witnessing the stories of people affected

by violence or injustice and learning with them, might be quite painful. Reflecting upon own privileges and responsibilities in (re)shaping unjust social relations and seeing our own reflection in someone else’s, previously unquestioned plight, might be overwhelming. But only such profound explorations of experiences and interpretations create possibilities for “shared yearning and dreaming” (Walters and Butterwick 2016). Should youth work bear the pressure of unlocking solidarity for young people? Absolutely. And yes, the process is rather uncomfortable. But so is the reality of many young people who have not been privileged to reach our venues.

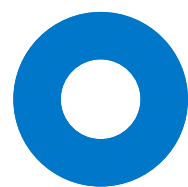
This paper presents one of the ways for addressing theoretical and empirical gaps in moving the normative vision for solidarity toward transformative practice and impact. The keys are still to be found.





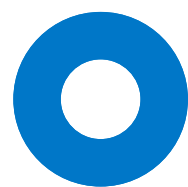
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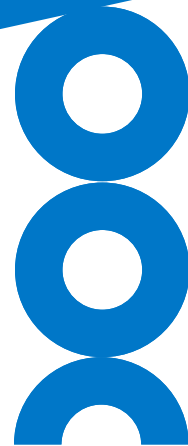
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## EUROPE TALKS SOLIDARITY

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