

Empowering the Pojok Peradaban Institute as an Epistemic Community in Karangwidoro Village, Malang Regency

Moh. Anas Kholish¹, Siti Rohmah²

¹Universitas Brawijaya, Malang, Indonesia; email: anaskholish.moh@ub.ac.id

²Universitas Brawijaya, Malang, Indonesia; email: sitirohmah@ub.ac.id

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Abstract

This community engagement project centers on strengthening the institutional capacity of Pojok Peradaban Institute as an epistemic community and an alternative campus situated in Karangwidoro Village, Dau, Malang Regency. Rooted in the critical pedagogy tradition and the praxis of emancipatory education, this initiative envisions the village not merely as a geographical entity but as an epistemic landscape where knowledge, culture, and power intersect. Through participatory and action-reflective approaches, the program mobilizes collaborative workshops, dialogical literacy classes, and institutional mentoring to construct a sustainable ecosystem of critical learning. The findings reveal that Pojok Peradaban Institute has metamorphosed into a hybrid locus of intellectual and cultural production. One that integrates philosophical discourse, local wisdom, and social empowerment. Beyond reinforcing organizational governance, the project ignites a communal consciousness that reclaims the right to think, to speak, and to transform. This engagement thus reconfigures the contours of alternative education in Indonesia, affirming that epistemic autonomy can flourish from the peripheries through solidarity, critical literacy, and civic imagination.



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A. Introduction

The transformation of education from an instrument of reproduction into a site of emancipation remains one of the most enduring challenges of modern civilization. As Ivan Illich (1971) observed in *Deschooling Society*, formal institutions of learning often entrap human creativity within bureaucratic enclosures that privilege

credentialism over consciousness. The emergence of community-based and alternative educational movements, therefore, represents a dialectical response to the alienation of knowledge from the lifeworld of ordinary people (Habermas, 1984).

Within this global discourse, the Pojok Peradaban Institute in Karangwidoro Village, Malang Regency, Indonesia, materializes as a locus where knowledge is reimagined as a social practice rather than a commodity. It embodies what Michel Foucault (1980) termed a “counter-discourse”; a space that contests the hegemony of institutionalized epistemes by reconfiguring the relationship between power and knowledge. Here, the village itself becomes a living classroom, and its inhabitants co-authors of their own intellectual destiny.

The marginalization of rural spaces in the production of knowledge has long perpetuated what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) calls epistemicide, the systematic erasure of local wisdom and subaltern rationalities. In this sense, revitalizing the village as an epistemic arena challenges the colonial residue embedded in modern education systems (Quijano, 2000). It offers a pathway toward epistemic justice, wherein alternative knowledges can coexist with, and even subvert, dominant paradigms.

The Indonesian context further dramatizes this epistemic divide. Universities, often ensnared in bureaucratic formalism and market rationalities, tend to reproduce urban elitism while detaching themselves from the communal textures of rural life (Tilaar, 2000). Against this backdrop, the Pojok Peradaban Institute performs an epistemological inversion: it relocates intellectual discourse to the margins, situating the periphery as a legitimate center of philosophical reflection and civic imagination (Barton, 2014).

Conceptually, this initiative draws from the idea of epistemic communities, networks of actors united by shared normative and causal beliefs, authoritative knowledge claims, and common policy enterprises (Haas, 1992). In the context of Karangwidoro, this concept is reinterpreted beyond policy-making: it becomes an ethical and pedagogical collective that fuses intellectual activism with cultural revitalization. The epistemic community thus becomes both the architect and the product of dialogical education.

This dialogical mode of learning is profoundly informed by Paulo Freire’s (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which envisions education as a dialogic process of conscientization; a journey from naïve awareness to critical consciousness. Freire’s notion that learners are co-creators of knowledge finds practical expression in Pojok Peradaban Institute’s participatory workshops, reflective discussions, and literacy-based empowerment programs. Education, in this paradigm, is not an act of depositing information but an act of liberation.

The praxis of critical education, however, must navigate the complexities of cultural pluralism. As James A. Banks (2016) and Sonia Nieto (2010) assert, multicultural education entails more than mere tolerance; it demands the redistribution of cultural capital and the recognition of marginalized voices. Karangwidoro’s socio-cultural heterogeneity, shaped by diverse religious, economic, and linguistic backgrounds, provides fertile ground for a multicultural pedagogy that values difference as a resource for learning rather than as a source of division.

In this regard, the Pojok Peradaban Institute functions not merely as a learning space but as a contact zone (Pratt, 1991), where multiple epistemologies encounter, contest, and transform one another. The pedagogical encounters within the Institute exemplify bell hooks’ (1994) notion of education as the practice of freedom, a process

that dismantles hierarchical relations between teacher and learner and cultivates mutual agency. This relational ethics of learning redefines the boundaries between knowledge production and social transformation.

The project's emphasis on critical literacy, the ability to read both the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Empowers villagers to interrogate the structures that shape their realities. As Luke (2012) emphasizes, critical literacy is not a neutral skill but a political act of reclaiming narrative authority. By engaging in reading circles, philosophical dialogues, and creative writing sessions, community members reclaim the language of their own experience against homogenizing narratives of development and modernity (Fairclough, 1995).

Moreover, strengthening the institutional foundation of such a community requires the cultivation of social capital; the trust, reciprocity, and networks that enable collective action (Putnam, 2000). Pierre Bourdieu (1986) reminds us that social capital is inseparable from cultural and symbolic capital; thus, the Institute's intellectual activities must be embedded in communal trust and shared meanings. When institutional design aligns with the community's moral economy, epistemic practices acquire legitimacy and sustainability (Coleman, 1990).

Governance within community-based institutions also necessitates adaptive and participatory mechanisms. Elinor Ostrom (1990) demonstrated that collective governance thrives when communities develop self-regulating norms and accountability structures. Translating this into educational praxis, Pojok Peradaban Institute fosters horizontal decision-making processes that reflect Jürgen Habermas's (1984) communicative rationality, a deliberative model where legitimacy arises from dialogue, not domination.

The sustainability of such an epistemic project depends on transformational leadership. Leadership that inspires vision and nurtures shared purpose rather than commanding obedience (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1990). Within Pojok Peradaban Institute, leadership is conceived as stewardship: a moral commitment to cultivate knowledge ecosystems that empower others to think critically and act collectively. This resonates with the Freirean dictum that authentic leaders are those who learn in dialogue with the people.

In this dynamic, the integration of local wisdom with global thought becomes essential. Arjun Appadurai (1996) reminds us that globalization, while homogenizing, also enables vernacular modernities; hybrid forms where local identities negotiate global currents. By interweaving indigenous narratives with critical theories, the Institute enacts what Santos (2014) terms ecologies of knowledge: plural and interdependent epistemic orders that resist monocultural reason.

The implications of this movement extend beyond the boundaries of the village. In redefining the contours of learning, the Pojok Peradaban Institute challenges neoliberal imaginaries of education that equate knowledge with market value (Giroux, 2007). It demonstrates that intellectual production can emerge from non-institutional spaces, that philosophy can grow amidst the rhythms of agrarian life, and that the periphery possesses its own grammar of civilization.

Ultimately, the strengthening of Pojok Peradaban Institute as an epistemic community and alternative campus signals a reawakening of the democratic imagination. It reclaims education as a moral and civic enterprise, a process of collective becoming that bridges thought and action. By re-centering the village as a crucible of ideas, this initiative transforms the margins into mirrors, reflecting back to society the profound truth that knowledge, when grounded in humanity, becomes an

act of liberation.

B. Methods

The community engagement initiative employed a participatory action research (PAR) framework, a methodology that integrates reflection, action, and collective inquiry in pursuit of transformative social change (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Unlike conventional research that positions communities as passive subjects, PAR constructs a dialogical partnership between researchers and participants both are co-creators of knowledge and agents of transformation (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). In this project, Pojok Peradaban Institute functioned simultaneously as a field, a collaborator, and a catalyst, aligning with the Freirean principle that authentic education must emerge from praxis reflection and action upon the world in order to change it (Freire, 1970).

The site of engagement, Karangwidoro Village in Malang Regency, East Java, represents a fertile sociocultural ecosystem in which traditional wisdom intersects with emerging intellectual consciousness. The selection of this site followed the methodological logic of contextual embeddedness, emphasizing that social transformation must be anchored within the moral, cultural, and ecological fabric of the community (Yin, 2018). The Pojok Peradaban Institute was not treated as an external object of study but as a living organism whose institutional vitality could only be understood through participation, observation, and sustained dialogue.

Data collection and community engagement unfolded through three interlocking phases: diagnostic exploration, collaborative intervention, and reflexive evaluation. The diagnostic phase involved ethnographic observation, semi-structured dialogues, and institutional mapping to discern both the visible and invisible structures shaping community learning (Spradley, 1980). During this phase, researchers immersed themselves in the rhythms of local life, attending reading forums, cultural gatherings, and creative workshops to decode the epistemic patterns embedded in everyday practices. This approach aligns with Clifford Geertz's (1973) notion of thick description, wherein cultural phenomena are interpreted not merely as behavior but as layered systems of meaning.

The second phase, collaborative intervention was structured around dialogical workshops and literacy circles designed to cultivate critical consciousness (*conscientização*) among community members (Freire, 1970). Activities included institutional design workshops, participatory curriculum planning, philosophical discussions, and art-based reflection sessions. Each intervention was co-facilitated by both researchers and community actors to ensure horizontal knowledge exchange. The pedagogical structure mirrored bell hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy, which posits that teaching and learning are acts of mutual liberation grounded in love, dialogue, and self-actualization. Through this participatory rhythm, knowledge became not a monologue but a polyphony of shared voices.

Reflexivity formed the third and sustaining phase of the method. Continuous evaluation was conducted through focus group discussions, narrative reflections, and participatory assessment tools that allowed community members to articulate their perceptions of change. This reflexive loop embodies Schön's (1983) reflective practitioner model, in which action and reflection are interdependent modalities of professional and civic learning. Here, reflection is not a retrospective act but an epistemic practice that reshapes future action (Argyris & Schön, 1996). Such recursive evaluation ensured that the project evolved organically, adapting to emerging insights and communal needs.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the engagement process.

Following the ethical precepts of community-based research (Israel et al., 1998), informed consent, transparency, and mutual respect were upheld in every interaction. Participants retained autonomy over the dissemination of their narratives, ensuring that knowledge production did not replicate extractive research logics (Smith, 2012). In addition, all research activities were designed to be reciprocal. That is, yielding tangible benefits for the community, whether in the form of institutional strengthening, literacy capacity, or social recognition.

Analytical interpretation of the qualitative data employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach (van Manen, 1990), emphasizing meaning-making through lived experience. Rather than reducing data to codes, the analysis sought to unveil the essence of communal learning, leadership, and epistemic solidarity as experienced by participants. Narratives were interpreted as texts of transformation (Ricoeur, 1976), revealing how the act of dialogical learning reconfigures both self and structure. Through iterative cycles of interpretation, emerging themes were synthesized into a theoretical model of community-based epistemic empowerment.

Ultimately, this methodological architecture embodies the convergence of participatory epistemology and critical pedagogy. It resists the technocratic tendencies of conventional development models and reclaims the ethical core of engagement as an act of solidarity (Said, 1994). By positioning knowledge as a co-constructed and lived process, the method aligns with the transformative aims of the Pojok Peradaban Institute: to render education not merely as instruction but as an insurgent practice of freedom. In doing so, the research itself becomes an act of resistance; a performative declaration that the margins are capable of producing theory, and that villages can indeed think.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Institutional Strengthening and the Architecture of Epistemic Communities

The process of institutional strengthening at the Pojok Peradaban Institute evolved through several concrete stages of community-based engagement. The initiative originated from a series of informal literacy gatherings among villagers, students, and facilitators in Karangwidoro Village, Dau District, Malang Regency. These small discussion circles—initially held in village homes and public spaces—gradually transformed into a structured learning community as participants identified the need for a sustainable platform to nurture critical dialogue and social reflection. In the early phase, around 25 active participants met weekly to discuss social and philosophical themes, using local issues as a starting point for reflection. The consolidation process culminated in the establishment of a modest physical space—later known as Pojok Peradaban—which functioned as a reading corner, discussion venue, and creative workshop hub for the village.

At the organizational level, institutional strengthening began with the formulation of a shared vision and mission through participatory meetings. The leadership team emphasized dialogical management, where decision-making was based on consensus rather than authority. This participatory model actively involved members—from students to farmers—in proposing and managing community programs, such as literacy training, cultural festivals, and philosophical dialogues. Over time, this inclusive process generated what Haas (1992) describes as an epistemic community: a collective bound by shared beliefs, moral commitments, and a common pursuit of knowledge production for the benefit of the community.

The establishment of the Institute was therefore not a bureaucratic initiative but a social and intellectual movement. Its governance drew inspiration from Freire's

(1970) notion of dialogical participation, positioning education and organization as acts of mutual recognition. Leadership operated more as facilitation than control, reflecting Habermas's (1984) concept of communicative rationality, in which legitimacy arises from open discourse rather than formal authority. This dialogical governance nurtured trust and transparency, generating what Putnam (2000) terms social capital—the network of relationships and norms that sustain collective action. In practice, this approach fostered strong cooperation between youth volunteers and local residents, particularly in organizing community reading events and creative writing workshops.

Institutional strengthening also manifested through several key achievements:

- The establishment of a village reading house and community library accessible to all residents.
- The initiation of weekly literacy and discussion circles, focusing on philosophy, culture, and civic ethics.
- The publication of a village journal and cultural bulletin, *Jurnal Desa Berpikir* ("The Thinking Village Journal"), featuring reflections and essays written by villagers.
- The formation of partnerships with local schools and universities to facilitate mentoring, training, and cultural exchanges.

These initiatives not only institutionalized the community's intellectual activity but also strengthened its social legitimacy. Symbolically, the Institute accumulated what Bourdieu (1986) refers to as cultural and symbolic capital—moral recognition and cultural credibility derived from its consistent contribution to public learning and creative expression.

The epistemic architecture of the Institute is both conceptual and material. It rests on three intertwined pillars:

1. Dialogue as method, ensuring that every voice participates in meaning-making;
2. Solidarity as structure, where relationships—not hierarchies—sustain the institution; and
3. Reflexivity as ethos, where continuous self-critique ensures ethical and intellectual growth.

These principles were realized through activities such as participatory evaluation sessions, where members jointly assessed program outcomes and reflected on their learning process. This iterative reflection allowed the Institute to adapt, evolve, and sustain community ownership of its mission. Through these mechanisms, the Institute evolved into a living intellectual commons, echoing Ostrom's (1990) insight that sustainable governance emerges from self-organized norms of accountability and reciprocity.

The institutional strengthening process also encouraged a shift in collective identity. Members no longer saw themselves merely as learners or volunteers, but as co-producers of knowledge and culture. This transformation aligns with Wenger's (1998) concept of communities of practice, where shared experiences and collaborative learning generate enduring forms of collective meaning. In Karangwido, this translated into the village itself becoming a site of theory and praxis—an epistemic space where ordinary citizens engaged in philosophical inquiry and social critique rooted in their lived experiences.

Ultimately, the institutional strengthening of the Pojok Peradaban Institute demonstrates that authentic community empowerment emerges through epistemic reconstruction. Rather than relying on external funding or bureaucratic schemes, the Institute's sustainability rests on moral vision, trust, and dialogical ethics. Its emergence as an epistemic community affirms that rural spaces can generate alternative paradigms of intellectual and institutional life—what Santos (2014) calls an ecology of knowledges: plural, inclusive, and emancipatory systems of learning that resist domination and affirm human dignity.

2. Dialogical Pedagogy and the Reclamation of Critical Literacy

The pedagogical model developed by the Pojok Peradaban Institute was grounded in the belief that education must be dialogical and emancipatory. Rather than replicating classroom hierarchies, learning processes were designed as participatory encounters where facilitators, students, and villagers engaged as co-learners. This orientation emerged naturally from the community's early experiences in reading circles, where collective discussion became a form of empowerment and mutual recognition.

The Institute organized weekly literacy circles in which participants read philosophical texts, social commentaries, and local stories, followed by open discussions. In these sessions, dialogue was not merely a method but a moral stance. Inspired by Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of dialogical pedagogy, facilitators encouraged participants to "read the world" before reading the word—connecting textual reflection to their lived realities. Villagers discussed issues such as agricultural change, environmental ethics, and social justice, using these dialogues to interpret and transform their everyday experiences.

These dialogical spaces cultivated what bell hooks (1994) calls engaged pedagogy—an educational practice that integrates critical thinking with emotional authenticity. The learning atmosphere encouraged vulnerability and courage, allowing participants to voice personal struggles and link them to structural issues. In doing so, education became a practice of freedom and solidarity, transforming both cognition and emotion into sources of collective strength.

A notable innovation in the Institute's approach was the integration of arts and performance as tools of literacy. Drawing inspiration from Augusto Boal's (1979) *Theatre of the Oppressed*, participants dramatized local dilemmas—such as gender inequality, youth disengagement, and environmental degradation—through community theatre. These performances served as both reflection and intervention, turning art into a rehearsal for social change. The embodied nature of this learning made abstract concepts tangible, bridging intellect and experience.

In addition to performance, multimodal literacy became a central practice. Participants were encouraged to express ideas through visual art, digital storytelling, and poetry. This plural approach to expression resonates with Gee's (2008) understanding of literacy as encompassing multiple semiotic domains. By validating diverse forms of communication—including local languages such as Javanese—the Institute resisted the hierarchy of "academic" literacy and affirmed the cultural dignity of vernacular expression, echoing Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986) call for linguistic decolonization.

The pedagogical practice also had a gender-conscious dimension. Women, who were often underrepresented in local forums, were encouraged to lead discussions and contribute writings. This inclusive ethos reflected hooks' (2000) advocacy for "teaching to transgress," a feminist pedagogy that dismantles silences

and promotes equality in participation. Over time, several women participants became facilitators themselves, a shift that reconfigured power relations within the learning space.

From a theoretical perspective, the Institute's dialogical pedagogy fostered critical literacy as defined by Freire and Macedo (1987): the capacity to read and reshape the social world. Participants not only analyzed texts but also authored essays and collective manifestos published in the *Jurnal Desa Berpikir* (The Thinking Village Journal). This act of writing publicly democratized the means of knowledge production and turned literacy into a vehicle for civic engagement. In the language of Fairclough (1995), it transformed discourse into a site of power negotiation.

Empirically, the impacts of this pedagogy were observable. Villagers who once hesitated to speak in public forums gained confidence in articulating arguments; young people began facilitating reading groups in neighboring hamlets; and discussions during literacy circles often inspired small community initiatives, such as waste management workshops and cultural events. These tangible outcomes illustrate how learning, when dialogical, becomes transformative beyond the classroom—a process Wenger (1998) describes as learning through social participation.

The reclamation of critical literacy also carried ethical and affective implications. As Nussbaum (2010) argues, education should cultivate narrative imagination—the ability to see the world through another's eyes. The storytelling sessions and open reflections fostered empathy, bridging social divisions within the village. Participants reported a greater sense of belonging and mutual care, confirming that literacy, when rooted in dialogue, strengthens both intellect and community.

Ultimately, the Pojok Peradaban Institute's dialogical pedagogy demonstrates that literacy is not simply the mastery of reading and writing, but the reclaiming of humanity through dialogue, art, and reflection. By positioning education as a collective act of love and hope, the Institute redefined learning as social transformation. In the words of Freire (1998), to speak a true word is to transform the world—and in Karangwido, that word has begun to echo as a collective voice of critical awareness and cultural renewal.

3. Institutional Strengthening and the Architecture of Epistemic Communities

The establishment of the Pojok Peradaban Institute as an “alternative campus” arose from a shared discontent with the limits of formal education. Many of its founders and facilitators were university graduates who felt that higher education, while intellectually rigorous, often alienated students from the social realities of their own communities. Academic discourse was abundant, but meaningful engagement with local issues—such as agricultural transition, youth marginalization, or cultural identity—was rare. Against this backdrop, the Institute emerged as a site for reclaiming the social purpose of knowledge.

At its core, this “alternative campus” did not attempt to replicate the structure of universities but rather to reimagine learning as a communal process. Instead of rigid curricula or credentialism, the learning environment was designed around curiosity, collaboration, and lived experience. Discussions took place in village pavilions, under trees, or in community halls—spaces symbolically free from institutional hierarchy. This spatial openness reflected the Institute's epistemological stance: that knowledge is not the monopoly of academia but a

shared human endeavor.

Empirically, the Institute hosted a range of programs—public lectures, community-based research workshops, art residencies, and philosophical dialogues—that invited both scholars and villagers to co-create understanding. Visiting academics shared concepts from philosophy or social theory, while community members contributed grounded insights from their daily lives. This dialogical exchange blurred the line between the “knower” and the “known,” actualizing Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ (2014) vision of epistemologies of the South, where diverse forms of knowing coexist and inform one another.

The curricular philosophy of the Institute emphasized knowledge as praxis. Participants were encouraged to link theoretical ideas with practical initiatives: critical readings on ecology led to collective tree-planting, discussions on gender equality culminated in local campaigns, and debates on cultural heritage inspired documentation of oral histories. In this sense, theory became not an abstraction but a compass for community transformation. The process embodies Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) notion of organic intellectuals—citizens who interpret and act upon the conditions of their own society.

One of the most distinctive practices was the “Village Lecture Series”, in which community elders, artisans, and farmers were invited to teach. Their life experiences were framed as legitimate sources of knowledge, challenging the conventional hierarchy that privileges academic expertise. This pedagogical inclusion represented a quiet but radical form of decolonizing knowledge, echoing Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s (1986) call to valorize indigenous epistemologies. By recognizing wisdom embedded in daily practice, the Institute repositioned local culture as a source of intellectual legitimacy.

The Institute’s work also embodied a critique of the commodification of education. In an era when universities often equate quality with marketability, the Institute affirmed that education must remain a public good. Its free and voluntary participation model disrupted the transactional logic of formal schooling. In line with Ivan Illich’s (1971) idea of deschooling society, the Institute showed that meaningful learning can flourish outside institutional control, grounded instead in mutual aid and curiosity.

Over time, this model cultivated a distinctive academic culture of solidarity. Students, activists, and local residents collaboratively produced small publications, including zines, essays, and short films, distributed freely within the village and online. These works did not seek academic prestige but rather epistemic justice—ensuring that community voices contribute to broader discourses. As Miranda Fricker (2007) argues, epistemic justice arises when individuals are recognized as credible knowers; the Institute thus operated as a corrective to the systemic silencing of grassroots perspectives.

The social impact of this alternative campus was tangible. Villagers began hosting their own study circles; young people initiated social media campaigns to document local wisdom; and the Institute became a reference point for nearby communities seeking to develop similar programs. Partnerships with local schools and universities further expanded its influence, integrating community-based learning into formal curricula. These collaborations showed that alternative education need not oppose institutional education—it can complement and humanize it.

The transformation of the Pojok Peradaban Institute into an epistemic

community and alternative campus represents more than an educational experiment; it signifies a cultural movement toward reclaiming knowledge as a collective, emancipatory practice. It challenges the urban-centrism and elitism of mainstream academia by rooting learning in the everyday life of a rural community. As de Sousa Santos (2018) reminds us, there is no global justice without cognitive justice. In this sense, the Institute's work contributes to both: by democratizing knowledge, it restores dignity to communities as producers, not merely recipients, of meaning.

D. Conclusion

The experience of the Pojok Peradaban Institute demonstrates that community empowerment can evolve into a movement of cultural and epistemic renewal. Through dialogical pedagogy and inclusive participation, the Institute transformed literacy into a collective process of awareness and creativity. Institutional strengthening was achieved not through formal bureaucracy, but through shared trust, openness, and critical reflection. The Institute proved that when education is rooted in dialogue and community collaboration, it becomes a tool for liberation rather than instruction. As an alternative campus, it bridged academic knowledge with local wisdom, challenging the centralization of expertise and affirming the community as a legitimate site of learning. This process contributes to decolonizing education and advancing epistemic justice, turning knowledge into a shared good rather than a privilege. In essence, the Pojok Peradaban Institute redefines community service as collaborative knowledge-making—where thinking, feeling, and acting merge to strengthen both individuals and the collective. It is a model of education as empowerment, proving that critical dialogue remains one of the most transformative tools for social change.

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