



Learning in the Street: Activism and New Matters of Education

Martin Laba¹

Simon Fraser University, Canada¹

Abstract

On February 15, 2019, inspired by Greta Thunberg, the Swedish teenager who initiated the #FridaysforFuture protests each week outside Sweden's parliament to compel political leaders to address climate change, young students by the tens of thousands took up the cause across Europe. Young people took to the streets with placards reading, "There is no planet B", "Climate over capitalism", "Respect your mother", and more. As reported in The Guardian (15 February 2019), an estimated 10,000+ students throughout the UK joined the strike, "defying threats of detention to voice their frustration at the older generation's inaction on the environmental impact of climate change." The protests were strongly endorsed in the UK by 224 academics who submitted an open letter to The Guardian ahead of the 15 February climate strike. It was also supported by the UK Labour leader, by Christiana Figueres, the former Executive Secretary of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, by Bill McKibben, co-founder of 350.org., and others. However, a Downing Street spokesperson on behalf of the Prime Minister offered a less than enthusiastic account noting that "It is important to emphasise that disruption increases teachers' workloads and wastes lesson time that teachers have carefully prepared for." The statement further argued that such lesson time is "crucial" in terms of education that will develop "top scientists, engineers and advocates" to address the climate problem. Greta Thunberg's tweeted in response that, speaking of time wasting, "political leaders have wasted 30 years of inaction." The point of analytical departure for this paper is precisely the authoritarian critique and dismissal of the student action as "time-wasting". Indeed, this response, is a summary account of all that is wrong with conservative educational/political philosophies, fundamentalisms, and practices that, as Henry Giroux has argued, "shrink" the spaces and capacities for "sustained and critical thought" (Giroux, 2017); that is, institutionalized imperatives that lack responsiveness, nimbleness, and most critically, relevance. This activism of the young around environmental urgencies is enormously significant in retheorizing education, and this paper explores precisely this retheorization in terms of learning social and political engagement, citizenship, and instigations of change. It considers an increasing activist consciousness among the young which necessarily takes them out of the bounded classroom for learning through real world consequences.

Keywords: *activism; civic literacy; critical educational culture*

1. New Matters, New Urgencies

There are "new matters" of education that are critical and urgent. A demonstration of these new matters is found in prevailing political conditions around the globe; in particular: in the rise of authoritarian regimes; in the brutal debasement of political discourse; in ideological rancorousness and violence; in the erosion of democratic foundations and values; in populist anger directed toward migrant tides and perceptions of "invasion" and racist claims of cultural contamination; in the insidious terminology and uses of "fake news" to blunt and eradicate critical and oppositional points of view; in demagogues instilling aggrievement, fear, and rage, and attacking the public sphere, the free press, and critical thinking. The most substantial antidotes to authoritarianism and demagoguery are ethicality, compassion, political engagement, and informed civic engagement—all should be understood as the foundation and custodial priorities of education. The project here is written in high relief. If the rise of authoritarianism can be understood, as well it should, as a failure of education, then education also holds the ameliorative key. As Henry Giroux has argued, "In the present moment, it becomes particularly important for educators and concerned citizens all over the world to protect and enlarge the critical formative educational cultures and public spheres that make democracy possible." (Giroux, 2017) [1]

May 3 was World Press Freedom Day, and the treacherousness of truth-telling was in sobering evidence in World Press Freedom Day accounts of the eroding global state of journalistic freedom. As the "press



freedom” special issue of Canada’s national newspaper, *The Globe and Mail* detailed, the incarceration and murder rates of journalists around the world (almost 250 journalists imprisoned and over 50 killed in 2018, with the numbers likely to increase in 2019) is gripping, distressing, and daunting. (The Committee to Protect Journalists, *The Globe and Mail*, 2019) [2] This paper is not an analysis of journalism, but it is an analysis of truth and education in perilous times. Journalism silenced, journalism imprisoned are clearly the silencing and imprisoning of democratic values and practices. And herein lies the project of education. In making his case for media education and media-literacy training in school curricula in particular, editor-in-chief of Reuters Stephen Adler argues that the work of journalists only matters “if people have the skills to distinguish between the factual and the fake, detect and weigh biases and assess the reliability of a wide range of sources.” (Adler, 2019) [3] A free and autonomous journalism depends on an informed public, and an informed public is the direct and powerful progeny of education.

2. Reveries of the Future

While educational method dominates much of the discourse around educational futures—along with speculative reflections on technological affordances, delivery efficiencies, and education disciplined for the goal of economic advantage in the free market through an entrepreneurial “training”—the most critical definition and rationale is, and always should be education as the means to acquire social agency for a robust and resilient democracy. The activation of students is precisely the objective of educational futures, and such activation is well inscribed in the progress of educational philosophies in terms of education as a moral and civic/political practice. (Freire, 2000) [4]

A recent musing on “the classroom of the future” by a dean of Engineering and a dean of Business at two Canadian universities is particularly instructive on the good, the bad, and the gaping lacuna in visions of education’s futures. (Puri and Waverman, 2019) [5] The authors argue for the introduction of new learning models—models that are meant to be “disruptive” and to eschew “mass teaching” to promote leadership, collaboration, creativity, personal development, and pedagogical thinking beyond the specificities of disciplinary professional technical skill sets. But their version of new learning model is driven by a market rationale, by the “aching needs” of the “working world”, by innovation in the corporate world that brings together “self-organizing teams of diverse talents”. Appropriately, they argue that universities’ persistent disciplinary silos are limiting and now possibly irrelevant in the preparation of students for a corporate universe of ever-expanding and authoritative algorithmic development and application and AI. What is glaring in its absence in this, and numerous other visions of technologically-enabled, data-dominated, market-driven and market-rationalized educational institutions, from governance to curricula, is the terminology and value of citizenship, and the core concept of education as a democratic public sphere. In a decades-old critical trajectory (Readings, 1996) [6], the university is on a high-speed economic treadmill of competition, turning knowledge into marketplaces of monetized information, turning students into consumers, while promoting the vacuous buzzword of “excellence”, an invocation based on accounting metrics in a “Darwinian world” (Harvey, 1998) [7] of university rankings, and other competitive, survival-of-the-financially fittest enterprises of educational institutions.

Without knowledge production that is fundamentally concerned with social change, education cannot develop and sustain the capacities of students to be engaged, informed, ethical, and critical citizens who are agents and instigators of social change. And this brings us to Greta Thunberg, and more expansively, the extraordinary power of “learning in the street”, a metaphor for the unbounded classroom.

3. Out of the Classroom, Into the Fire: Students as Protagonists

From the #FridaysforFuture protests inspired by the young Swedish student Greta Thunberg, to the “Never Again” movement and March for Our Lives against the obscenity of gun violence in by the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High in Parkland, Florida, and many other examples of student protests and social movements, these activist moments should strike any educator focussed on pedagogy in the precarious, convolutions, and closures of authoritarian and populist times as exactly the kind of independent and critical initiative we should want our educational futures to be—learning that is never hermetically enclosed by physical space (the classroom), lessons plans, syllabi, or other curricular or institutional structures. This is not a rejection of order and foundation in the educational environment; but it



is a recognition of the criticality of responsive and nimble educational imagination to support and advance what Marshall Ganz refers to as “three tools essential for renewal” fully possessed by young students: “a critical eye of the world, a clear view of its needs and pain, and hopeful hearts that give a sense of the world’s promise and possibilities.” (quoted in Jason, 2018) [8]

The disruptive initiatives of the young are as old as the first medieval universities in Europe, and the history of student activism is at once ancient, current, and future-facing in significance. The vigorous and expansive call to action and demonstration by students around global and catastrophic environmental degradation is an invocation of the educator’s cliché—the teachable moment; that is, a teachable moment in the reverse direction of our usual understanding of this phrase. This is a teachable moment from the informed, infectiously hopeful, democratic, and unrestrained activism of the young for new educational imperatives and directions, for a retheorization of pedagogy and how it must not only accommodate, but moreover facilitate and advance learning that is relevant, “real world”, and consequential as students learn to actually act upon their world as protagonists in their own lives and times.

The “strike” of students for “climate over capitalism”, as articulated on one demonstration placard, and Thunberg’s retort that “political leaders have wasted 30 years of inaction” to the UK Prime Minister’s admonitions about detentions and wasting the lesson time preparation of teachers, offer a particularly enlightening instance for the most expansive and urgent concept of learning and educational urgencies. There are compelling summary points drawn from this instance for considerations of educational development and change:

- 1) Education must build and sustain a sense of civic fortitude, a commitment to civic engagement, and the strongest inclination to civic action.
- 2) To employ Kristen Case’s phrase, seek “moments of classroom grace” (Case, 2014) [8]; that is, forge classrooms that are never enclosures, in either senses of physical or intellectual, and instead are spaces that engage and inspire while they also unsettle, provoke, and challenge complacency,
- 3) Student instigations of social change and their responsibilities in the stewardship of democratic values and principles are deeply embedded in the contested and volatile universe of popular culture, a culture of digital media technologies and communications. Grasping this popular culture, and the pedagogical enabling of its pervasive and enormously powerful social dimensions is key because education and pedagogical practices do not exist outside of, or apart from popular culture.
- 4) Giroux argued in his account of critical pedagogy as intervention that “pedagogical practice presupposes some notion of the future” (Giroux, 2011; 74) [10]. What is at stake in educational futures, articulated, contested, and realized in pedagogical practices, is the nurturing and sustenance of democratic society. Never has this project been more urgent than in the times of authoritarians and demagogues. Yet hope is found in abundant evidence in learning in the streets.

References

- [1] Giroux, Henry (2017) “Thinking Dangerously: The Role of Higher Education in Authoritarian Times”, *Truthout* (June, 2017). Accessed on May 3, 2019 at <https://truthout.org/articles/thinking-dangerously-the-role-of-higher-education-in-authoritarian-times/>
- [2] The Committee to Protect Journalists (2019). “Free the Press”, *The Globe and Mail* (May 4, 2019).
- [3] Adler, Stephen J. (2019). “When people are properly informed, fake news doesn’t stand a chance”, *The Globe and Mail* (May 4, 2019).
- [4] Freire, Paulo (2000). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- [5] Puri, Ishwar and Waverman, Leonard (2019). “How the university can save itself—from itself”, *The Globe and Mail* (April 27, 2019).
- [6] Readings, Bill (1996). *The University in Ruins*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- [7] Harvey, David (1998). “University, Inc.”, *The Atlantic* (October 1998). Accessed on May 3 at www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1998/10/university-inc/377274
- [8] Jason, Zachary (2018). “Student Activism 2.0”, *Ed. Harvard Ed. Magazine* (Fall 2018).
- [9] Case, Kristen (2014). “The Other Public Humanities”, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (January 13, 2014). Accessed on May 5, 2019 at <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Ahas-Ahead/143867>
- [10] Giroux, Henry (2011). *On Critical Pedagogy*. (New York: Continuum, p. 74).