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*Critical Pedagogies: Equality and Diversity in a Changing Institution*

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“The Anxiety of Political Influence: A Theory of Teaching and Activism”

Like so many other children, I loved learning. I read science books until my eyes blurred. I obsessed over tree identification manuals. Practised writing poetry after finding a collection of Lewis Carroll. I built tree houses out of wood stolen from nearby construction sites. But also, like so many other children, I hated school. A series of detentions, suspensions, a horrible prison-like punishment called “Saturday School” (which extended my weekday incarceration into my only days of freedom) and repeated threats of expulsion. Armed security guards wandered the perimeter, ensuring that we didn’t escape. That we didn’t miss an important lesson. Where demands to “sit down” and “be quiet” are more frequent than invitations to wonder. My aversion to school was more than a simple uninterest in the American Civil War or subject-verb agreement. It was an aversion that went beyond that.

Schools do much more than teach us how to read and count. And secondary to introducing us to the natural world and secondary to showing us pathways to character development, schools teach us how to be a productive member of our culture. Schools give us the experience and tools that we can use to survive the “real world”. Tools like obedience, subservience, and respect (“fear”) of authority and the state. At this task, schools are exceedingly successful. We were taught to respect power and money. Power suits. Expensive cars. And though teachers don’t make much money, in the classroom they have all the power.

And it's interesting that as you move up the education ladder, teachers gradually shift from being majority female to majority male - but this is probably another discussion.

With the promise of learning without imprisonment, university offered a greater degree of autonomy and better access to an education that was actually interesting and engaging. And indeed, at least in Humanities and some of the Social Sciences, much time is spent unlearning many of the lessons and lies presented in schools. Social interactions are less about conforming, but only slightly. It is also at university that we stop being merely students, and begin to straddle two positions: that of student, and that of customer.

However, here at the university, socialization continues. Or more likely, we can start re-enacting the social lessons learned in school, from the gendered violence at frat parties (and the dismissive response by many university police) to the class division between basic student halls and luxury student accommodation. At the faculty level inequality seems structurally engrained, and Edinburgh University was named yesterday as the worst for zero-hours contracts. This is the coming together of theory and practice.

This is also where the role of educators comes in. And also the question of the chicken and the egg. Can a radical educational model then create autonomous creative people that will alter society (hopefully for the better)? Or are our educational institutions too bound up in the dominant culture? Must we change culture in order to change the classroom? This is a false dichotomy. A chicken can become that chicken both within the egg, or become a chicken later in its lifetime, since genetic mutation occurs both in the embryonic stage and can occur later in life due to outside environmental influences. The possibility for change is everywhere. The question then becomes, how can we - as teachers in adult education - best encourage a world towards equality and best create the possibility for self-fulfillment open to all the world's

inhabitants.

But first, a few definitions.

Anarchism is the opposition to authority or hierarchical organizations in the conduct of human relations, including, but not limited to, the state system. So, when I talk about anarchist education models or anarchist relationships, I'm talking about learning and connecting in ways that are non-coerced, horizontal, participatory, and contribute to the intellectual development and wellbeing of everyone involved, be they student or teacher. As I desperately cling to the bottom of the faculty ladder, I am increasingly sceptical of my own role as educator within a state institution. Does the college, university, or prison in which I teach make self-fulfilment and personal development a priority? As a teacher, how complicit am I in state imposed structural hierarchies? How am I contributing to social control and to the socialization of students as consumers and productive workers, which we will then sacrifice to the god called The Economy? Can I really be certain that I'm showing students the possibility of escape, or am I just training the next generations of bureaucrats, politicians, policemen, and estate agents who, like me, are just cogs in the machine, re-enforcing our ever smaller metaphorical and literal prison cells? By setting up prison education projects, who am I really helping? The people in prison or the prison industrial complex itself? Is it possible to make theories of equality more than just theories?

Earlier this year, I attended the big *Modern Language Association Conference* in Boston, where delegates and speakers seemed continuously to wrestle with the ideas of implementing theory into practise. Many were self-described activists, though their activism stopped at the door of their classrooms. On a panel about the Occupy movement, none of the speakers who had been active at the protest camps brought their radical philosophies into the classroom, and

in fact, seemed to view them as two distinct arenas. Though the problem of failed praxis was recognized in a panel on queer theory, when Katherine Bond Stockton noted that while most lefty academics immediately recognize the problem with 'trickle down' economics, many still operate under similar notions of 'trickle down' theory. In a separate panel on teaching in community colleges, Mary Gutierrez points out that simply believing in equality doesn't automatically lead to an equal society. There is another step between the two. Between the idea of a better world and the manifestation of a better world. And that step is action.

The speakers on the Occupy panel did not see a relevant connection between their role as educators and their work as activists. Many other radical thinkers and activists see the importance of radical thought in the classrooms, but are unsure how to implement their ideas of horizontalism and equality in their own educational models. How can a feminist create a feminist classroom within a patriarchal institution? How can an anarchist open a classroom for anarchist models of teaching and learning within a hierarchical system of education? And is such an imposition of political philosophy immoral?

Though we strive to encourage our students to become better scholars and critical thinkers, we hesitate to use our role as teacher to introduce students to critical radical philosophies. If it is our purpose to keep our jobs at all cost - a very tempting intention - then it makes sense to continue carrying out the agenda of our employing institutions. To create workers and consumers. Judges and executive assistants. Though, at Edinburgh University, students are less molded to become executive assistants and more to become Executive Vice Presidents or CEOs. It seems that now our only hope is that they'll manage lay-offs and corporate mergers with a glimmer of ineffectual remorse, or that they'll be able to impress their American counterparts with quotations from Cicero.

Maybe if you're here, it's because you think - as I do - that we can do better than this. It's maybe because you see the corporate influence over higher education, and the nefarious power of money in our colleges and universities. Many of the lessons that students learn in school are preparing them for survival in an individualist and capitalist world, an economic model which has had a very helpful hand in deciding what is taught and how.

In order to participate in the deschooling of society, we must recognize that our positions as educators are central to social struggles against inequality. That if we want expanding circles of feminism, anarchism, equality and personal autonomy in our society, a damned good place to start is in our own classrooms.

However, utilizing our role as educator as we fight for a better world causes many of us great anxiety. Mainly because of the illusion of the blank slate - that students come into the classrooms as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge, and it would therefore be unethical to hold a position that is anything but neutral, but I'm not the first person to say that you can't be neutral on a moving train. Radical education moves away from the idea that students' minds are blank. Each student comes into the classroom carrying the prejudices, privileges, and oppressions from the wider world, creating what my colleague Lena - who helped to organize this conference - calls the microcosm of society.

Transformative education liberates the student from "receiving" knowledge from a superior and more respected "teacher", and works towards helping students to become active agents in their own learning and becoming. If the egg represents the classroom, or the microcosm, then by altering the egg - by changing the model of education towards more horizontal and participatory methods - then we have a better chance of affecting the macrocosm: society, that great big chicken. A chicken that's stuck in a battery farm. Pumped full of

antibiotics and chemicals. That's never seen the sun. We both have smaller and smaller cages. Figuratively and literally. As corporations take over our universities and profit comes at the expense of just about everything else, departments and school are streamlined to create cogs and workers more efficiently. Ethics? Art? Poetry? A waste of university resources. Sunlight? Beaks? Room to turn? Unnecessary.

Surely it doesn't have to be this way.

If as radical thinkers we dream of creating a world of personal autonomy and freedom (for both us and the chicken), then those principles should be the very foundation of our role as teachers. Howard Zinn said that "Politics is pointless if it does nothing to enhance the beauty of our lives." Our radical ideas are for nothing if we keep them imprisoned in our minds, unable to do that whole Zinn life beauty enhancing thing. If the personal is political, then so, I would argue is the professional.

If we thought that creating a more egalitarian world, and specifically a more egalitarian classroom, were impossible then maybe we wouldn't be here. We would just take our bimonthly paychecks. If we were teachers in Arizona, we might not teach Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* or even Shakespeare's *The Tempest* because they're banned in that state. Or, if we thought it were hopeless, we might leave. Give up. Work where job security is better and where 60 hour weeks are not the norm. But here we all are.

A few years ago, I spoke at a conference in this very building, *Researching Feminist Futures*, where I argued that instead of making it easier for marginalized and oppressed groups to climb the ladder, we should destroy the ladder itself. Break the glass ceiling, you say? No, we have to burn down the whole building. But this is where my thoughts have changed slightly. It's much easier to break down a ladder if you can grab hold of it to begin with. And it's much easier to burn down a building if you can get near it. Even better if you can get inside.