6 Preparing for Public Life

Education, Critical Theory, and Social Justice

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The public education system in America is one of the most important foundations of our democracy. After all, it is where children from all over America learn to be responsible citizens, and learn to have the skills necessary to take advantage of our fantastic opportunistic society.

(George W. Bush, May 1, 2002)

While this statement is an obvious slip of the tongue, and sadly a sign of a semiliterate man, creating responsible citizens really demands that members of society collectively participate in maintaining healthy public institutions and restraining rather than nurturing those opportunistic forces that have great contempt for public life and an undying love for the monopolization of knowledge and profit.

Given that public schools in any democracy are always intended to be agencies of civic mindedness and responsibility, and that the well-being of young people is the pretext for almost every political movement on the planet, these institutions should be used to encourage youth to recognize their power to act upon the world via critical awareness.

In every country on every continent, young people have always played a critical role in struggles for social justice. In the last 500 years alone—certainly since the advent of the European university in the Middle Ages, societies have witnessed social transformation on a grand scale, which has been mobilized, or at least in part energized, by young people (Boren, 2001; Sherrod, Flanagan, Kassimir, & Syvertsen, 2005).

With the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child on November 20, 1989 the United Nations took the first steps to institutionally realize the active participation of youth in global affairs:

Article 12: States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Article 15: States Parties recognize the rights of the child to freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly.

In order to embrace youth activism, it is essential to move beyond the simplistic notion that kids inhabit a land of innocence. From birth on, as children are being initiated into values and beliefs—what it means to be an integrated member of a particular group—they come to occupy an inherently ideological and thus political space, whether or not they are aware of it. It’s important to ask: What kinds of cultural practices are they being apprenticed into, what notions of youth are they subjected to, and what effects can young people have on such processes?
Unfortunately, youth, especially the poor and racially subordinated, are far too often left out of drafting history, describing social realities, and debating social policies and practices. In fact, conservatives in the United States have worked relentlessly to dismantle participatory democratic spaces that nurture their potential to come to voice. Pertaining to public schools, Noam Chomsky (1999) elaborates:

> It starts in kindergarten: The school system tries to repress independence; it tries to teach obedience. Kids and other people are not induced to challenge and question, but the contrary. If you start questioning, you're a behavior problem or something like that; you've got to be disciplined. You're supposed to repeat, obey, follow orders.... (p. 117)

Even in the well-intentioned calls to “empower” and “give voice” to students, young people are mostly heard about but rarely from. What many educators fail to realize is that even the most progressive and concerned pedagogue can’t empower kids. On the contrary, it is both objectifying and patronizing to assume that teachers can simply tap any given child on the shoulder with a magical epistemological wand, abstracted from the critical process of active engagement and meaning making. This critique also applies to the notion of “giving voice.” It is presumptuous to claim to possess the ability to bequeath the power of expression. Since all people already have voices—often critical ones at that—the real challenge is for educators to be willing to create dialogical spaces where all lived experiences and worldviews can be heard. In other words, will teachers be able and willing to create the necessary self-empowering conditions that allow kids of all walks of life to explore, theorize, reveal, and act upon the truths behind the worlds that they inhabit?

There are certainly plenty of reasons for young people to work for social change in the United States. Nationally, one-in-five children grow up poor; 9.2 million children currently lack health insurance; 3.9 million people are homeless (a number projected to increase 5% each year) and 1.3 million (or 39%) of them are children. The nation ranks 17th of all industrialized countries in efforts to eradicate poverty among the young, and 23rd in infant mortality. In addition to these economic hardships, young people are experiencing a great deal of discrimination along the lines of race, language, disability, religion, gender, and sexuality.

The government’s response to the growing problems that youth in this country face is the implementation of a standardized curriculum, high stakes testing, accountability schemes, English-only mandates, strict zero-tolerance policies, and Draconian budget cuts. In this era of No Child Left Behind—conversely referred to as “the war against the young”—6 million children have thus far been left in the wake. Meanwhile, millions of students are being drugged into conformity and complacency in the name of Attention Deficit Disorder, and public schools are now largely controlled by private interests such as pharmaceutical, publishing, and food companies, for-profit education management organizations, and corporate lobbyists.

While the title No Child Left Behind connotes fairness, compassion, and equity and the instigators of testing mania promise academic and professional success for the nation’s children, they virtually disregard why inequities exist in the first place. As these advocates of a corporate model of schooling hide behind notions of science, objectivity, and universal knowledge, what is largely missing from national debates and federal and state policies—and what should be central to any good teacher education program and public school classroom—is recognition and analysis of how racism, the structures of social class, and other oppressive and malignant ideologies inform actual educational
practices and institutional conditions. These factors play a much more significant role in students’ academic achievement than whether or not they have access to abstract content, a monolingual setting, and constant evaluation.

In this political climate where conservatives readily blame progressive educational programs, democratic social policies, and organized labor for the country’s problems, K-12 students need to learn how to be more effective agents of change. In order to be active “subjects” of history rather than passive “objects” to be acted upon, manipulated, and controlled, literacy development should work in a way that helps people read the economic, social, and political realities that shape their lives in order to develop the necessary critical consciousness to name, understand, and transform them (Freire & Leistyna, 1999).

In order to work toward youth liberation as part of the formal curriculum, educators can help mobilize students into organized political bodies (critical communities of struggle) so that they are able to voice their concerns and realize their own goals. This is precisely what the U.S. Constitution protects—not the mandates of a Wall Street agenda. Such political participation requires praxis—the ongoing relationship between theory and practice. Educators can mentor students into critical inquiry and theory. Not to be confused with what’s traditionally thought of as the “higher order thinking skills,” critical in this sense implies being able to understand, analyze, pose questions, and affect the sociopolitical and economic realities that shape people’s lives. Developing critical consciousness isn’t an exercise to get people to think in a certain way; rather it is intended to get them to think more deeply about the issues and relations of power that affect them.

In this spirit of ongoing reflection and action, theory embodies how people interpret, analyze, and make generalizations about why the world works the way that it does. It is the why and how of what has been happening around us, and not simply a focus on what is occurring and how to effectively respond. While theory provides existing explanations of the whys and hows of the world, theorizing is the ability to actively engage bodies of knowledge and human practices for the logics and sociohistorical conditions that inform them so that they can be reworked. It encourages individuals to evaluate, based on their own experiences, expertise, and insight, the strengths and weaknesses of any conceptual and practical movement and recontextualize and reinvent its possibilities for their own predicaments. As an integral part of any political project, theorizing presents a constant challenge to imagine and materialize alternative political spaces and identities and more just and equitable economic, social, and cultural relations. It makes possible consciousness raising, coalition building, resistance, activism, and structural change.

As part of their apprenticeship into theorizing, students could gain a great deal of theoretical and practical insight from the study of social movement and action research, which documents the power of movements and their impact on people, public discourse, policy, institutions, and governments. It looks at the ways in which activists understand and make use of the cracks of agency made possible by shifting economic, political, and cultural relations, and how organizations and networks develop, mobilize, and change. Action research has also always had a political and transformative agenda explicitly woven into its theoretical and empirical fabric. Advocates of this exploratory model embrace the idea of doing research with others rather than on them in an effort to understand and consequently change any given situation. Students should not only learn about these areas of inquiry but they should be encouraged to engage in their own empirical projects.

In such undemocratic times, it’s not surprising that this type of critical practice is often discouraged. The youth of the world can certainly be looked to as a democratizing force capable of dismantling the structured inequalities in societies. It is for this very reason that conservatives vigilantly work to contain and control them. Reactionary educators in
the United States like Diane Ravitch, Lynne Cheney, and William Bennett—omnipresent spokespersons for the Republican Party and capitalist interests—have argued and continue to argue that attempts to reveal the underlying values, interests, and power relationships that structure educational and other social policies and practices have corrupted the academic environment. Such efforts to depoliticize the public’s understanding of social institutions, especially schools, in the name of neutrality are obviously a reactionary ploy to maintain the status quo.

In other words, this assault on theorizing is in part connected to ways in which public schools have been used as an indoctrinating force to deskill students by working to mold them into uncritical receivers and consumers of existing theory, but rarely viewing them as active and creative participants in the generative process of understanding. This is especially evident as globally public schools are falling prey to the kinds of corporate logic that package thought as a commodity for exchange in the marketplace rather than inspiring the kinds of inquiry that probe that very logic and use of public energy and space. Within these corporate models of public education the production of technicians in all disciplines (areas of study which are artificially disconnected from one another) comes at the expense of transdisciplinary thinkers and producers of social knowledge about the world. As students of all levels are distracted or lured away from critically reading historical and existing social formations, especially those that maintain abuses of power, they often become the newest wave of exploited labor power and reproducers, whether they are conscious of it or not, and the target of oppressive social practices. It is precisely this lack of inquiry, analysis, and agency that a critical and activist-based philosophy of learning and teaching should work to reverse.

Social Justice in the Classroom: Lessons from History

As part of their formal educational experience, it would be enormously invaluable to expose students to the history of activist efforts to change the world. There are plenty of examples to choose from out of the vast historical pool of grassroots organizing, intercultural, and intergenerational cooperation, and international solidarity. The curriculum could include the exploration of the labor movement in the United States, and youth participation therein: it should investigate important events like the Newsboy Strike in 1899, the 1903 “Children’s Crusade,” and the development of the American Youth Congress in the 1930s. Students could also examine efforts to desegregate schools in the 1950s and the work of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. They could find a great deal of inspiration for their own political projects in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and the college campus activism that was mobilized by groups such as Students for a Democratic Society. There are also lessons to be learned from government efforts to mobilize youth involvement in public policy such as the National Commission on Resources for Youth in the 1970s (see Wikipedia for an elaboration of each of these). Students need to be apprenticed into conducting archival research so as to be able to tap into this vast history.

The youth of this nation have also inherited an immense legacy of radical thought, research, and action (Duncombe, 2002; Tilly, 2004). An indispensable part of praxis is to make use of existing theory and research in order to study historically significant events and the actors and organizations therein that have worked toward economic and social justice. To name a few of these individuals and groups: the Abolitionists, the First and Second Internationals, the Cuban, Mexican, and Russian revolutions, anarcho-syndicalism, experiments in social democracy, first and second-wave feminism, and anticolonial, civil rights, indigenous, and antiwar movements. There is also much to learn from the his-
tories of trade union revivals, labor and environmental coalitions, antinuclear protests, and the global networks that have developed in the fight against AIDS.

It is important to note that such research needs to go beyond an introduction to the primary personalities that led many of these movements, and move into the world of everyday people struggling for change, struggles that set the stage for the emergence of great leaders.

Students could also learn from the ways that movements have critically appropriated from the past. Take for example the sociohistorical underpinnings of the 1999 Battle for Seattle. Largely coordinated by the Direct Action Network (DAN), this multi-interest decentralized manifestation was the product of years of political reinvention (Kauffman, 2002). Seattle protestors found strength in the history of the peace movement, the civil rights activism of the 1950s and 60s, antinuclear and environmental movements beginning in the early 1970s, the actions against U.S. intervention in Central America in the 1980s, and decades of anticolonial, feminist, queer, and antiracist theory, research, and activism.

Many of the techniques and strategies used in Seattle, such as affinity groups, spokescouncils, consensus building and the use of nonviolence, also have historical roots. Affinity groups—small protest units that choose targets and tactics—are derived from the Iberian Anarchist Federation in Spain which used this underground organizing structure in the 1930s during the Spanish Civil War. It was later reinvented by chapters of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and other civil rights and antiwar activist groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States (Kauffman, 2002). Spokescouncil meetings have descended from the early Soviets of the Russian revolution. Internationally, the “No Nukes” protestors of the 1970s critically appropriated this format so that representatives of affinity groups could meet, dialogue, and develop action plans. The idea of consensus decision making was handed down by the Quakers and enhanced by feminist movements that have also valued voice, inclusion, and dialogue. Nonviolent civil disobedience was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi’s struggle to liberate India from British colonial rule, and later by the Civil Rights Movement in the United States under the guidance of Martin Luther King, Jr.

The forces that made Seattle possible were also influenced by the anti-Vietnam war movement in the early 1970s that implemented small and decentralized operational strategies as opposed to many of the massive and unwieldy organizational structures of the 1960s.

In addition, many protestors in Seattle benefited from the work of the organization ACT UP, a radical coalition of activists that got its start in the late 1980s in the fight against AIDS. Its members were tired of typical party politics, the divisiveness of identity politics, and the general ineffectiveness of endless lectures at fixed protest sites. “Through innovative use of civil-rights-era nonviolent civil disobedience, guerrilla theatre, sophisticated media work, and direct action, ACT UP helped transform the world of activism” (Shepard & Hayduk, 2002, p. 1). Rejecting the binarism between artistic expression and social responsibility and borrowing aspects of the carnivalesque approach to politics that have been around since the Middle Ages (Bakhtin, 1984), contemporary activists have made effective use of technology, street theater, puppets, block parties, art, music, and dance.

Many of the activists fighting for economic and social justice in Seattle also learned about coalition building from the anti-IMF agitation of the mid-1970s, efforts to bring down the apartheid government in South Africa, battles against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Zapatista revolution, the WTO protests in 1995, the shutdown of the Multilateral Agreement on Investments of 1998, and the anti-World Economic Forum (WEF) demonstration in Davos that same year.
The intent of exploring the history of activism is not to generate nostalgia in these conservative times, nor does it offer up a recipe book to be followed to the last grain of salt; rather, it is a way to inspire youth to engage in the critical appropriation and reinvention of revolution as these struggles offer theoretical, empirical, and practical springboards for contemporary efforts. Such lessons should be part of any public education system that hopes to prepare students for public life.

Not only do students readily express an interest in their own lives and what they are deeply connected to, but they also generate a great deal of interest in education and the state of society if allowed to connect in substantive and politically influential ways to the very world around them. When given the opportunity to speak, youth are more than willing and able—as they have always been—to analyze social injustice and come up with solutions to such problems. Youth movements in the past two decades provide a great deal of evidence of this. Students of all ages and grade levels have taken up such causes as education reform, immigrant rights, AIDS awareness, environmental protection, animal rights, antiwar activism, civil liberties, and gay, disability, and women's rights. They have battled against sweatshop labor, racism, police brutality, poverty, and the rise in incarceration. There have been a plethora of recent protests against discriminatory and abusive social and educational policies such as in California against the passage of Propositions 187, 209, and 21 led by organizations like the Critical Resistance Youth Force and Youth Organizing Communities. In fact, there is a vast array of organizations that merit investigation of the likes of Youth on Board, the Youth Activism Project, the Freechild Project, and the National Youth Rights Association (see Wikipedia for an elaboration of each of these).

But it's important to note that social justice has no fixed definition. Not only are there conservative claims to social justice, but empowered communities from across the ideological spectrum could in fact result in the rule of an oppressive majority. Youth should be exposed to and learn from cases where feminist movements, working class struggles, Gay and Lesbian groups, antiracist efforts, and antiglobalization movements have experienced discriminatory and conservative tendencies; and where some struggles for national sovereignty have turned fascist, mass revolutions have become totalitarian, or social democracies have capitulated to capitalist demands.

If progressive educators and community activists wish to continue to do the important work of creating civic-minded students that are prepared to actively participate in a vibrant public sphere, then kids should also be exposed to how the art of organizing is undergoing radical changes as a result of the ways that activists have been making effective use of new interactive technologies. Youth are often technologically literate with such innovations, but not in the ways that they have been used to mobilize social justice projects.

First, students should explore how media have always played a pivotal role in activist efforts—with the advent of printing, newspapers, telephones, radio, TV, film, and so on. It is then much easier to understand how the power of cultural production and circulation has taken on new life with digital, multimedia, and wireless technologies, and especially with the Internet. Helping individuals and organizations mobilize is a wireless, multimedia palette that includes notebook computers, personal digital assistant (PDA) devices, cell phones (with digital cameras built in), text messaging, pagers, global GPS positioning systems, and digital camcorders. These technologies facilitate organizing and coordinating efforts. Along with the aforementioned tools, and often in connection to them, the Internet has ushered in a revolution in cultural activism. Unlike the activists of yesteryear who accomplished so much with so little, the new hybrid “smart mobs” have access to e-mail, blogs, podcasts, computer-faxes, listservs, hyperlinks, chat rooms, and downloadable street posters with tear-off instructions. These and other cybertools are all used
for educating the public on pertinent issues, building and mobilizing communities, coordinating events locally, nationally, and internationally, and influencing policy initiatives both locally and globally. They can also be used to transcend the language divide with software that instantly translates messages. Making effective use of webcasting, news outlets offer access to Internet radio and video feeds, information and photo archives, and frequently updated news reports. There is an abundance of hyperorganization websites that keep the public up to date on current events, that support real-life mobilization, and that connect activists to other like-minded organizations through hyperlinks. And, there is an endless stream of electronic information that is readily available through e-journals, online zines, and info-pages.

These innovative technologies have also made possible the reinvention of many traditional methods of activism into electronic civil disobedience in the form of online petitions, boycotts, blockades, sit-ins, hacktivism, and other kinds of cyberprotest.

Perhaps the most revolutionary contribution that these technologies have made is that they’ve radically advanced social networking. The Internet allows people, with relative facility, to cross geographical, political, and professional boundaries. As cyberculture helps groups transcend traditional borders, develop cross-interest coalitions, and forge collaborative knowledge, it simultaneously opens the door to more inclusive and effective political struggle. Students can be apprenticed into how such efforts have been coordinated and encouraged to experiment for themselves how to implement these practices.

In this era of globalization, in which no society is entirely isolated and untouched by neoliberal economic policies and practices, and any local action has a global impact and vice versa, any constructive cross-disciplinary, multidimensional approach to youth activism has to have an international component. Of the 6.3 billion people that currently live on this planet, almost half are under the age of 25. Half the world’s 1 billion poor are children. Victims of the residue of a brutal history of colonial rule, sustained racism and patriarchy, and now the imperial grasp and draconian mandates of deregulation and structural adjustment, 11 million of these kids under the age of 5 die annually because of malnutrition, dirty water or a lack thereof, disease, and poor housing. Hundreds of millions of youth around the world are not getting a formal education and millions are trapped in the sex trade and sweatshops or caught up in military conflicts where they are often forced into fighting someone else’s economic and ideological wars.

Students in the United States need to be exposed to the global justice movement’s innovative efforts to work simultaneously through a politics of location (i.e., area-specific conditions, traditions, and economic interests) and a politics of global unity. The goal has been and should continue to be to search out new forms of democratic and revolutionary identification, to recognize differences and commonalities within struggles for economic and social justice, and to work through dialogue and action to sustain what has become a “movement of many movements.” In this way, youth in the United States can more effectively walk on to the political stage in solidarity with other young people from around the world.

If “the public education system in America is one of the most important foundations of our democracy...where children from all over America learn to be responsible citizens,” as the president claims, then teaching social justice should be a fundamental component of the curriculum.

References


