‘By ones and twos and tens’: pedagogies of possibility for democratising higher education

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This paper concerns the relationship between teaching and political action both within and outside formal educational institutions. Its setting is the recent period following the 2010 Browne Review on the funding of higher education in England. Rather than speaking directly to debates around scholar-activism, about which much has already been written, I want to stretch the meanings of both teaching and activism to contextualise the contemporary politics of higher learning in relation to diverse histories and geographies of progressive education more generally. Taking this wider view suggests that some of the forms of knowledge which have characterised the university as a progressive institution are presently being produced in more politicised educational environments. Being receptive to these other modes of learning cannot only expand scholarly thinking about how to reclaim intellectual life from the economy within universities, but stimulate the kind of imagination that we need for dreaming big about higher education as and for a practice of democratic life.

Keywords: politics of education; higher education; popular education; prefigurative politics

Education-in-its-broadest-sense

Even before the Browne Review of higher education was initiated by the last British Labour government in 2009, it had become difficult to speak about education as a critical cultural activity, a practice of freedom, an institution of social power or site of political struggle in the UK.1 This had not always been so; despite conservative trends in the mainstream, work in radical adult education flourished here throughout the nineteenth century and both the critical sociology of education and cultural studies of pedagogy strengthened during the 1970s and 1980s (Bernstein [1971] 2003; Young 1971). However, four intervening decades of increasingly economistic, utilitarian and technocratic discourses about schooling and higher education, combined with the gradual institutionalisation of managerialism and marketisation in schools and universities created what Fielding and Moss (2011) call a state of ‘historical amnesia’ about the politics of education.

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In the absence of mediating discourses, education is thus often construed as a politically barren field of activity into which no criticality can seep and upon which nothing critically creative or transformative can grow – or, within the framework of market logics, upon which nothing should grow unless it contributes demonstrably to the consolidation of elite power. This is one particular manifestation of a wider culture of ‘contracting possibilities’ in which people ‘experience change as a symptom of ... powerlessness rather than as the product of ... agency’, and are increasingly responsible for negotiating difficult circumstances with diminished economic, political and emotional resources (Kompridis 2006, 267). Perhaps not surprisingly, intellectual pronouncements of the political ‘death’ of critical education abound in the UK and across the world.

However, it is possible – and important – to challenge this condition of ‘disimagination’ by bracketing these hegemonic imaginarities of education and creating conceptual and discursive space for the disclosure of alternatives (Amsler 2008; Giroux 2013). In education, as in so many other areas of life, there are ‘social institutions around the world that embody, however, imperfectly, emancipatory ideals and thus potentially prefigure broader alternatives’ (Olin-Wright 2012). Seeking them out enables us to see more clearly the variety of ways that we can and do, as Nikolas Kompridis (2006) puts it, enlarge the cultural conditions of meaning, possibility and freedom in everyday life. Indeed, one response to the contraction of space for criticality has been the emergence of new social movements that are mobilised by people for whom the loss of hope in existing institutions is not a reason for despair but a strategy for decolonising knowledge and experimenting with the production of new political and cultural forms (Gibson-Graham 2006; Gordon 2007). Ana Dinerstein calls them ‘hope movements’, and they ‘demand not another way of doing [and certainly not an improvement on present ways of doing] but another mode of being’ in the world (Dinerstein and Deneulin 2012, 598).

Because both doing and being differently in the world imply learning, hope movements are inherently pedagogical. This is why education – in its broadest sense, rather than as a form of schooling – is located at the heart of progressive social movements and aspirations for democratic ways of life. According to John Dewey, this is why education cannot be reduced to a set of techniques or to the cognitive or social work that goes on in schools or universities; indeed it is often not what happens in formal institutions at all. Education in this sense is rather the creative activity which guarantees ‘the social continuity of life’ itself – the ‘reorganisation of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases one’s ability to direct the course of subsequent experience’ (Dewey 1938, 39; Rodgers 2002). Understanding educational work in this way immediately connects us to deeper philosophical and political questions about what
constitutes a good life, how we can live well together, and what different kinds of learning can contribute to this project.4

Perspectives on the politics of higher education
There are many ways to articulate a critical theory of education, and higher education in particular. Here, I suggest three routes. One is to study how and why demands for political recognition, rights and equality have been articulated around educational concerns. A second is to examine the situations in which education has been defined as a primary (rather than supplementary) form of political action; and, in relation to this, to understand the role that pedagogy plays more broadly within social movements. Finally, we can engage with critical theories and philosophies of knowledge, learning and the political which frame everyday life itself as a pedagogical experience. While this last route promises much for rearticulating a progressive politics of higher education in the present context, each perspective contributes to this project in different ways.

Political struggles around and for education
The most immediate way to visibilise the politics of education is to demonstrate how schools and universities are key sites of the negotiation of power within society (Apple 1995, 2013; Bernstein [1971] 2003; Boler 1999; Freire 1985). Within them, struggles over the distribution of personal, local and national resources; the establishment and challenge of social hierarchies and classifications; homogeneity and diversity, recognition and respect, standardisation and autonomy, hegemonic and subaltern knowledge, and control and freedom are continually being played out. These processes furthermore permeate all areas of educational activity from designing pedagogy and curriculum, to educational relationships, assessment, arrangements of space and time, and institutional forms. People struggle to participate in formal education where they are denied it and disempowered as a result; they struggle to transform education where it forces them into false identities or subordinate social positions; and they refuse to participate in education where it is deemed to be irredeemably damaging or repressive.

Today, the ‘educational dimension of struggles within and against neoliberalism’ offers some of the most vivid examples of educational politics in practice (Coté, Day, and de Peuter 2007, 3). Since the turn of the century, there have been many hundreds – perhaps thousands – of student-led protests and campus occupations across the world (Amsler 2011; Berkeley Journal of Sociology 2013). Such actions intensified after the global capitalist crisis of 2008 catalysed the accelerated privatisation of education in the UK, South and North America, East and South Asia, and Europe, and have recently expanded into teacher and parent/carer-led
resistance to standardised testing and the closure of secondary and primary schools in the USA (DNAinfo 2013; Goodman and Hagopian 2013; Kelley 2013; Schwartz-Weinstein 2011).

In addition to exposing the everyday injustices of the political economy of education, many of these groups have also begun to share knowledge and experience – particularly around common problems of working conditions, debt, housing and migration, which are often inseparable from educational concerns. This political traversing is generating moments of collective learning. The history of popular politics suggests that this sort of quiet pedagogical work which happens behind visible performances of resistance, and for the most part outside formal curricula and courses, is a vital means of developing more critical understandings of the politics of knowledge and education within local communities and in everyday life (Motta 2011a).

**Education as a form of political action**

Such focused struggles to defend democratic educational practices, institutions and policies tend to articulate when groups of students, educators and others organise to resist the elite capture of education. Radical ethics notwithstanding, some therefore retain a reactive or defensive orientation. Extending the perspective to include a broader history of educational politics, however, sheds light on different contexts in which learning and teaching are regarded as forms of political action and creativity in their own right. From mediaeval hedge preachers promoting subversive interpretations of religious texts in Ireland to the eighteenth-century formation of German study circles and folk schools encouraging public philosophical debate; from the nomadic dissent of the Levellers to the nineteenth-century establishment of university settlements extending higher education to workers living in urban settlements; from the formation of the Plebs League in Oxford to the endurance of the Chautauqua Movement in the USA; from the establishment of anarchist free schools and universities in Spain and Italy to the ‘flying university’ in late nineteenth-century Poland; from the rise of British independent working-class education to the growth of popular education in Latin America and across the world – policies of economic and political exclusion have long been accompanied by projects of critical education to alleviate, correct, compensate for and resist abuses of power (Scott 1999; Steele 2010).

While these were all very different projects, they share a common conviction that critical literacy and understanding about the causes and implications of the conditions of life are essential tools for individual and collective empowerment, and that empowerment is a transformational learning process. When speaking about the purpose of workers’ education in 1970s Britain, for example, Raymond Williams explained why he resisted imposing canonical standards of knowledge in his classes for the Workers’
Education Association: his ‘impulse to Adult Education was not only a matter of remedying deficit, making up for inadequate educational resources in the wider society, nor only a case of meeting new needs of the society, though these things contributed. The deepest impulse was the desire to make learning part of the process of social change itself’ (Williams 1983, 158). Those striving to improve the worlds in which they live need to learn not only abstract textual knowledge, but how and why people organise and conflict, how power relationships work, how to critique dominant discourses and create new vocabularies and conceptual frameworks; how, in other words, to survive. In this way, learning spaces within social movements exceed the functions of academic education to become ‘infrastructures of resistance’ and sites of personal and collective care (Schantz 2010).

While many educationalists have an interest in social movement learning for this reason, neither the epistemologies nor the methods of learning and producing knowledge in popular education have taken strong root as pedagogical practices in universities. There are reasons for this – not least of all that popular education is not synonymous with higher education. But the more likely reason may have to do with the fact that, in many knowledge systems, co-operating with marginalised and non-elite subjects is regarded as a liability to professional reputation; for as Paulo Freire once pointed out, ‘the intellectual activity of those without power is always characterised as non-intellectual’ (Freire and Macedo 1987, 122). Given the devaluation of local, indigenous and practical knowledges within academic scholarship, rethinking the politics of university education and the meaning of the higher educator may require the unlearning of traditional approaches to theorisation which privilege performativity over humble co-operation, abstraction over praxis, individual knowing over collective learning, and monological solution-giving over dialogical inquiry (Motta 2011a).

**Everyday politics as pedagogical**

Finally, we may conceive of education in a more integrated sense as a constitutive condition of politics and life itself. This perspective illuminates, for example, how neoliberalising processes operate not simply by asserting that social life can be organised along market principles, but by aggressively construing institutions, policies and human beings that can be persuaded or compelled to organise it in this way (Brown 2009; Giroux 2004). Many non-capitalist and anti-authoritarian ways of life thus incorporate practices of self-education, collective reflexivity and the collaborative systematisation of practical knowledge in attempts to create social bases for autonomous institutions (Bifo 2004; Day 2005; Motta 2012). They cultivate ‘an expanded concept of struggle, [which] emphasizes the importance of everyday practices and of contests over meaning in the reproduction and transformation of hegemonic power relations’ (Coté, Day, and de Peuter 2007, 5).
The ‘politics of possibility’ is one name for this mode of politics which works largely through processes of ‘disengagement and reconstruction rather than by resistance through reform or revolution; with the end of creating not a new knowable totality … but of enabling experiments and the emergence of new forms of subjectivity’ (Day 2011, 108, 113). It is often called ‘prefigurative’ because it aspires to create new worlds that embody and enact not-yet futures by using the resources of the existing world, paying particular attention to the micro-politics of space, time, language, the body and the emotions through which the power of these resources operates (Gibson-Graham 2006, xxvii).

**Politicising teaching and learning**

We can understand the relationship between higher education and politics in any of the above-mentioned ways, but I would like to suggest that the last opens up particular possibilities to politicise educational practice in our current circumstances (and, as a result, opens wider doors for the other routes as well). Because dominant discourses of ‘teaching and learning’ in British universities tend to obscure the contested nature of both activities, they lend themselves to technical and often fatalistic interpretations of the contexts in which we engage in them. For the past 20 years, the British educational system has therefore been used as a particularly fecund example of the deleterious effects of governmentality and managerialism on all levels of education, and as an illustration of possibilities for resistance (Ball 2013; Gill 2009; Shore 2011; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). However, while scholars have produced quantities of data about the structural transformation of academic institutions and subjectivities, this knowledge is poorly connected to the everyday practices of those working within, against and beyond the university. As Antliff argues, ‘high theory, movement knowledge, self-knowledge need to be examined and worked on – we have so much theory, so much critique, and often feel so trapped’ (Antliff 2012, 138). Henry Giroux (2013) thus argues that

> there is a need to invent modes of pedagogy that release the imagination, connect learning to social change and create social relations in which people assume responsibility for each other. Such a pedagogy is not about methods or prepping students to learn how to take tests … It is about a moral and political practice capable of enabling students and others to become more knowledgeable while creating the conditions for generating a new vision of the future in which people can recognise themselves.

As such pedagogies are not – and, it should be remembered, rarely have been – ascendant within most schools or universities, creating space for them therefore requires a variety of different kinds of work that encompasses much more than the learning or teaching of academic
knowledge and skill. One way of understanding these is to look to forms of social movement learning that are explicitly reflexive about the moral and political purposes of education.

**Pedagogies of possibility**

To educate the imagination, we can explore some of the work being done by socially engaged educators, artists and activists who attend not only to the cognitive dimensions of learning but also to the epistemological, affective and material conditions of learning how to think, feel, do and be in liberating ways – what one environmental activist has characterised as the ‘beautiful stuff behind the scenes’ of more visible action and moments of transformation (interview with the author, 2012). They can be described as pedagogies of emergence and becoming; of encounter and discomfort; and of sociality and community. Together, these form the foundations for more general pedagogies of possibility; acts of teaching and learning that aim, as John Dewey once wrote of all art, to ‘break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness’ (Dewey 1954, 183). While at one level this is arguably the purpose of all critical education, the emphasis on educating the possibility of possibility itself is particularly important in historical moments of closure – periods of political-economic and cultural contraction such as our current one in which, as the British cultural theorist Stuart Hall once wrote, ‘the “balance of social forces” is very powerfully against hope’ (Taylor 2006, 17).

Of course, the cultivation of possibility as such does not constitute the practice of democratic or egalitarian politics. While we may be able to cautiously discern between activities that open alternative futures rather than predetermining, foreclosing or repressing them, ‘the art of making the possible what is impossible in the present’ is only a preliminary condition of radically democratic politics – not its guarantee (Thomassen 2005, 114). Elizabeth Ellsworth’s (1994, 301) now-classical critique of naïve faith in critical pedagogy’s ‘inherently’ emancipatory character continues to call us to account, asking: ‘what diversity do we silence in the name of “liberatory” pedagogy?’ Her point was not that we should reject critical pedagogy or desist from participating in educational projects for empowerment. It was rather that we must take responsibility for the specific normative values and objectives of all our projects; remain vigilant about how power works through ostensibly liberatory practices such as dialogue, witness and cooperation; and be critically aware of the possibility that such practices can easily be deployed for conservative and repressive ends. For the purposes of this paper, it is thus important to clarify that the politics of possibility is in fact a politics of specific kinds of possibilities – of becoming, of generous forms of encounter with others and otherness, and of the relationships of friendship and solidarity that sustain such activities – of
possibilities which, to gloss John Dewey’s arguments about experience, make further possibilities possible.

**Pedagogies of emergence and becoming**

When informal educators (those working in popular education, the arts and cultural activist organisations) have talked with me about what motivates their work, they often speak first of a duty to redress or alleviate the injuries of inequality and injustice which affect them and those they work with. However, they tend to turn very quickly to the various kinds of work that they do to alleviate other pressures that constrain their ability to work. These include the political and physical closure of public institutions, the enclosure of spaces for open dialogue across a range of contexts; the flattening of and hostility towards heterogeneous ways of thinking and being; the silencing of critical ways of seeing the world; the ‘hardening’ of relationships in classrooms and organisations; and the fragmentation of individuals, communities and other forms of collective life. These forces of closure have in some cases become so disempowering that many informal educators prioritise activities that can simply open spaces for possibility – the argument being that before transformative things can happen, happenings must be possible.

The pressing question for educators, therefore, is what practices have the potential to do this, and to shatter illusions that there are no alternatives to existing political and economic relations. Pedagogies of becoming prioritise two types of such work: creative and aesthetic learning (‘art’, in the broad sense), and dialogical and relational learning (‘conversation’, in the broad sense). Both offer methods for, and demand that we attend to problems of creating spaces, times and opportunities for happenings, on the one hand, and for people to engage in open-ended, imaginative and non-essentialist ways of learning and being together, on the other. But what does this look like in practice?

Beth teaches communication skills to people seeking asylum and their children in a class for English as a Second Language (ESOL) in an English city. She explains that the ‘product’ of communication, its explicit subject matter, only makes sense as a form of critical literacy when it is learned through processes of dialogue where people talk and listen to each other in ways that are not pre-emptive or predetermined, and which can be generalised to other areas of life. You can ‘see yourself changing’, she argues, when people shift from habitual ways of talking about their personal lives and social issues to engage in ‘real’ dialogue about collective conditions of life and knowing with one another. That, she claims, ‘is where the attempt to close down thought, the attempt to close down ideas, opinions, is counteracted’ (interview with the author, 2011). The process that Beth describes may be described in philosophical terms as a practice that Nikolas Kompridis refers to as ‘intimate critique’:
a practice of critical dialogue that aims to preserve and renew trust, and to facilitate a commitment to ongoing processes of cooperative problem solving … based on the recognition and performative acknowledgement that we are the facilitators and guarantors of one another’s fragile freedom … to criticize and innovate. (Kompridis 2006, 262)

In another context, Jill – an environmental activist, popular educator and teacher of teachers – explains the power of creative activity to prevent the foreclosure of conceptual and political space. ‘Art can act in a very slow and sometimes ineffable way’, she said, ‘that can’t be predicted or described’ (interview with the author, 2011). The power of its ineffability stems from an affective logic of creative practice, which – like ‘real dialogue’ – cannot be easily regulated, quantified or controlled. The very act of creating space, time and desire for such work thus establishes a relatively autonomous ‘outside’, which itself provides further possibilities for challenging the logics of hierarchy, accountability and control that permeate neoliberalised institutions.

The transformative potential of these practices is clear enough when they manifest in explicitly activist educational and artistic activity. When they are less visible in classrooms, private conversations and institutional relations, however, they often remain unrecognised and thus deprived of critical theorisation. However, as the disruption of habituated patterns of feeling, thinking and acting can open spaces for being otherwise in everyday life, it is vital that educators are able to facilitate such work. This is not least of all because

the democratic future that we’re after is actually a future that we will only be able to make by opening the present differently. I think that many of us experience the present as terribly closed – not just closed because certain options have been foreclosed, but also closed because of certain stoppages in progressive history. I think the opening that we have to cultivate is a kind of affective and intellectual opening to political possibility that would help us read the present differently. (Brown et al. 2006, 41)

What we learn from Beth, Jill and other cultural workers who are enacting pedagogies of possibility in informal educational spaces that are often overlooked as sites of philosophical significance is that theorising the politics of possibility only makes practical sense when we attempt to put it into educational practice, but that in doing so we necessarily expose ourselves to discomfort and critique. However, educators are not necessarily receptive to receptivity, hospitable to critique or confident in being radically creative. We are often even less so when in precarity or when running on the hamster wheels of capitalist institutions (Kompridis 2006, 257). To make pedagogies of becoming possible, pedagogies of encounter and in many cases of discomfort are therefore important as well.
Pedagogies of encounter and discomfort

To become aware of the limits of our understanding and horizons of possibility, it is necessary to experience troublesome knowledge and discomforting encounters with otherness and critique, and to reframe these ‘not [as] the impassable boundaries where possibilities end, but the real boundaries where all possibilities begin’ (Viera Pinto, in Freire 2000, 99). To date, many critical theorists, particularly those prioritising the cognitive, intellectual and sociological dimensions of critical practice, have presumed that this sensibility is a precondition for critique, and in some cases that it is an inherently human trait which can be repressed by and liberated from knowable relations of alienation, abstraction and domination (Amsler 2012). Others, however, begin by regarding this as a condition of possibility that is necessarily educated or mis-educated, and whose learning is grounded in a particularly demanding set of material conditions and desires which are learned themselves. Megan Boler, for example, grounds her understanding of critical pedagogy by asking ‘what we – educators and students – stand to gain by engaging in the discomforting process of questioning cherished beliefs and assumptions’ (Boler 1999, 176). Her point is that emotional investments in certain knowledges, practices, ways of knowing, disciplines, power structures and identities have been ‘insidiously woven in the everyday fabric of common sense’ (176). As Kompridis points out, because the experience of challenging this is ‘genuinely uncomfortable’, it is understandably resisted (Kompridis 2006, 214; see also Kompridis 2011).

A question therefore arises for educators: what practices have the potential to make us more receptive to discomfort as a critical emotion, and to engaging critically and generously in our encounters with difference, ambiguity and unfamiliarity? This question is pressing in light of the experiences of cultural workers mentioned above, which suggest that opportunities for people to experience such encounters – what one popular educator calls ‘constructive conflict’ and the foundations of democratic life – are being ‘stripped away from our lives’ through privatisation, managerialism and individualisation (interview with the author, April 2012). A substantial element of his pedagogical work with people living in marginalised communities, for example, has therefore involved learning how to create ‘physical spaces where people are able to come together and exchange ideas, feel respected and feel that there are possibilities out there other than just staying on a track’. This, he argues, is ultimately what ‘generates energy that goes off in directions that you hadn’t really anticipated’. Like other popular educators, he uses a range of participatory tools and techniques to accomplish this. But he also asserts that in fact, creating possibilities for constructive conflict involves dedicating time to ‘deeply mundane time-consuming processes that really require a lot of personal energy and a lot of mundane stuff like just being, getting food, making sure that children are cared for,
having fun, [and] making sure that people are healthy’ (interview with the author, April 2012). He says that this work is ‘really hard’ – not because it is physically or intellectually demanding, but because – like other local, indigenous and political knowledges and practices – it is often invisible, unrecognised, unsupported, and socially and intellectually devalued.

**Pedagogies of community and solidarity**

It would thus be unwise to conclude that we can effectively create spaces of possibility solely through individualised pedagogies of becoming, discomfort and encounter. Nor is it possible to imagine that learners and teachers are autonomous, rationalist subjects of liberal democracy who can remain comfortable in individualised and regulated social relationships. It is easy to avoid being troubled or transformed on one’s own; new possibilities cannot emerge without at least ‘the presence of a plurality of local worlds and cultural practices’ (Kompridis 2006, 220, 229). Conditions for transformative learning thus also include the cultivation of radically democratic collective relationships. To think and govern ourselves in new ways, we must learn to be together otherwise, and in our current political-economic circumstances learning to be together differently implies studying the arts of self-governance and co-operative organisation. Those who engage in such work outside formal education have much experience to offer to this project. Jim, for example, a member of an autonomous artist–activist collective, explains that working in open and collaborative ways demands that we exercise a ‘weak muscle’ in a society which expends huge energy and resources teaching people how to be individualised rather than collaborative (interview with the author, 2012).

But how do we ‘exercise a muscle’ that is actually a way of being or a condition of possibility? What can close distances between divided subjects in a way that expands the horizons of intelligibility for both? Cultural workers teach us that we can undertake such bridging work in simple ways: through the militant sharing of work and resources, regular visualisation of personal and collective experience, organisation of collaborative activities and performances, and cultivation of relations of mutual aid and spaces for convivial conversation. Each of these activities creates possibilities for ‘multiple experiences to be all in the same room at the same time’ and thus provides opportunities to connect individual with collective knowledge (interview with the author, 2012). Such may even be regarded philosophically as practical methods for ‘keeping open … the logical space of possibility’ where logics of impossibility are materialised through the fragmentation of physical space or fixed societal classifications and roles (Kompridis 2006, 204). As David, an environmentalist popular educator illustrated,

the government and [the corporation] know how to compartmentalise, or think they know how to compartmentalise, like – that’s what an activist looks like,
that’s what an Asian community organiser looks like, this is what a trade union is like. What they didn’t expect was for us all to speak with each other, and that’s where things become a bit scary for the powers that be. They can’t compartmentalise us, and I thought that was incredibly powerful and possibly one of the biggest successes of our campaign. (interview with the author, 2012)

Such accomplishments, although they may appear spontaneous, are in fact always rewards of considerable patience and time. The politics of time – to reflect; deliberate and agonise; build trust, understanding and confidence; and take ownership of a process – are critical. As Wendy Brown argues, without time for ‘both deliberation and negotiation, and of the leisureliness that affords them, the conditions for democracy are literally eviscerated’ (Brown 2005, 8). But time – in networked societies of speed, in the frenzied temporalities of frontline politics, in the compressed labour processes of advanced capitalism, in the gendered divisions of labour in schools and universities, in the compartmentalised processes of learning and discovery into tightly ordered committee meetings and lines of administered institutions – is precisely what many educators cannot imagine having (Adams 2011). This is, in fact, one of the most common reasons given for working in informal rather than formal educational contexts, as even the most powerful pedagogies of becoming, encounter and sociality may be ineffective or counterproductive when embedded in short-term and institutionally defined relationships. For those choosing to remain within, therefore, learning to honour an ‘ethic of slowness in an era of neoliberal corporatism’ is an important part of any politicised educational project (Leung, de Kloet, and Chow 2013).

Pedagogies of community and solidarity are therefore important dimensions of prefigurative politics within existing institutions because they enable not only the critique and re-imagination of ourselves, others and society, but also because they recognise the affective and social labour upon which critical thought and practice rely. Pedagogies of becoming, encounter and sociality have the potential to oppose and undermine capitalist rationality and to strengthen radical friendships, knowledge and practices. As Dewey pointed out,

a sense of possibilities that are unrealized and that might be realized are, when they are put up in contrast with actual conditions, the most penetrating ‘criticism’ of the latter that can be made. It is by a sense of possibilities opening before us that we become aware of constrictions that hem us in and of burdens that oppress. (Dewey 2005, 360)

The experiences of educators working in and with social movements illustrate the power of living critique which names the potentiality of the here and now by learning to read the world through alternative eyes. Sara
Motta, reflecting on her work with women popular educators and revolutionaries in Colombia and on the process of articulating a feminist critical political economy from below, emphasises the importance of these forms of knowledge and practice for politicising university education. She also asserts that it ‘would be unwise at this political conjuncture to close off our political imaginary, through a dismissal of its relevance, to our political context’ (Motta 2011b). Rather, she argues, historical experience suggests that ‘it is urgent to cultivate an ethic of openness, dialogue, experimentation and exploration’ if we are to offer any ‘hope to break out of the straightjackets of politics as normal’ (Motta 2011b).

**Prefiguring democratic life in higher education**

Arguably, for all the radical thinking and practice that goes on everywhere inside them, contemporary British universities are good examples of places in which there is much trapping in ‘the straightjackets of politics as normal’. Those occupying positions of economic and professional power within have developed a range of defences which appear to render them relatively impervious to ethical, political and pedagogical critiques of consumerism, marketisation, economic instrumentalism, managerialism and quantitative measurement of the value of knowledge – contested political processes which are now, in dominant discourses, simply asserted as the conditions of possibility for education itself.

By developing and practising some of the pedagogical approaches mentioned above, however, educators are able to ‘open up greater possibilities for imagining and cultivating alternative social relationships in the minds of those who would live them’ (Mueller 2012, 30; Motta 2012, 146). The evidence that this is possible is not far out of reach; social theorists from a variety of traditions have long demonstrated that institutions are not permanent objects but ‘relationships to remake and ideas to replace’ (Mueller 2012, 39). Once this is understood, it becomes easier to problematise and play with the language that we use in our everyday interactions within the university. This in turn makes it possible to create space for more authentic forms of dialogue, or for dreaming big – beyond the resistance to conservative education and towards the construction of real progressive utopias (Olin-Wright 2012). Indeed, educators working in universities – at least within the present political context of the UK – have comparatively few risks to take. From the perspective of education-in-its-broadest-sense, it is not particularly radical to suggest that education should help people achieve political and intellectual autonomy, satisfy the need for flourishing social collectivities, foster egalitarian relations of economic organisation, encourage creative experimentation, and cultivate a general reflexivity of self and hospitality to otherness. It is only slightly more daring to suggest that students, teachers and concerned others should either take control of or
disinvest from institutions that are not democratically accountable; to chal-
lenge forms of power that operate through people’s fear of exclusion and
desire to be loved; to challenge deterministic ontologies which stunt both
critique and radical imagination; and to cultivate capabilities that allow
people to engage critically and openly with difference and complexity.

However, these may still be leaps too far for those who are bound by
circumstance or by intellectual positions that separate teaching from politics.
It is legitimate to dream in steps rather than leaps; we also learn this from
social movements. In the context of the university, for example, what
happens when instead of discussing employability in a meeting we discuss
liberty or equality; when we introduce concepts of solidarity or mutual aid
into the meeting of a mock-Research Excellence Framework panel; when
we set self-management or empowerment as a learning outcome; or when
we inquire about co-operation when presented with the ‘student satisfaction’
scores of other departments? What happens when academics queer official
spaces by refusing to perform hierarchical deference; when we try to make
decisions in horizontal ways; when we problematise undemocratically
derived criteria for evaluation; when we assert our right to write with and
for a local community whose journal has a negative ‘impact factor’ in publi-
cation rankings? What happens when we ask to distribute resources for
teaching based on principles of mutual aid rather than competition, when
we hold space open for dialogue about items of ‘any other business’ on a
bureaucratic agenda? What happens when we demand time to reflect on
lessons from past failures rather than spending time planning how we will
‘go forward’? What happens if we facilitate public discussions about the
politics of dignity and the problems of university funding from the perspec-
tive of the perpetually indebted student and worker? What happens when
we subvert institutional norms without asking or announcing permission,
sabotage harmful institutional policies in order to work ethically, and create
alternative spaces and projects both within and outside of the institution
itself? What happens when we say no to discourses of impossibility and yes
to possibility?

It is, of course, impossible to say what would happen concretely in any
of these situations – partly because the outcomes will be different for differ-
ent people in different circumstances. The argument is simply that the act of
imagining them, which will always have either been made possible by a
prior leap of faith in possibility or a way of preparing to make one, is an
important form of critical–practical philosophising; an act of, as Nathan Jun
puts it, learning a ‘way of life founded on the praxis of seeking, question-
ing, complicating, problematizing, potentiating [and] “possibilizing”’ (Jun
2012, 297). There are forms of learning that can enable educators who are
not particularly politicised to engage in even small acts of resistance,
self-determination and co-operative creativity. Prefigurative pedagogies of
possibility, which give us permission to begin from wherever we are, offer
insights into how to ‘use the institutional space without being of the institution, without taking the institution’s goals as one’s own’ (Shukaitis 2009, 167; see also DeLeon 2008).

In the end, engaging in small acts of prefigurative politics enables us to do something that Howard Zinn implored educators to do many years ago, to ‘challenge these rules that quietly lead the scholar towards trivia, pretentiousness, orotundity, and the production of objects: books, degrees, buildings, research projects, dead knowledge’ and to ‘defy the professional mythology that has kept us on the tracks of custom’ (Zinn 1997, 503). And in a moment when the production of dead knowledge is essential for the continued development of universities as machines for the exploitation of immaterial labour, it is clear that these may not be small acts at all (Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010; Haworth 2012; Thornton and Maiguashca 2006).

But what we really learn from taking a broader view of the political terrain of education and from experiences of learning in informal and politicised contexts is that learning courage and care is part of learning to make alternative futures, even – or especially – within our everyday lives where doing so often seems insignificant. J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006) once pointed out that even within the general framework of capitalist society, in the project to make life liveable and enlarging for all, capitalism is not the only thing we are up against. There is also melancholia and nostalgia, cynicism and despair, resignation, struggles for status and recognition, and the entrenched injuries of prejudice and privilege. Those who remain committed to the idea that the university is a progressive institution may also find it necessary to reconsider our attachments to elite systems of valuation and recognition, and to cherished parts of their intellectual identity, to make ‘room for neglected formats of reason’ and for autonomously formulating and valorising our own (Kompridis 2006).

Both doing and being in the world imply learning. Where the kinds of doing and being we aspire to are radically oppositional to prevailing powers, and where the kinds of learning which allow people to live in emancipatory ways are foreclosed, then the politics of education become visible. This is why, despite what appear on the surface to be successful efforts to reduce higher education to a functional activity or a matter of individualised consumption, universities remain sites of profound political contestation over what it means to know. In this context, education-in-its-broadest-sense will continue to nourish the heart and soul of political struggles for economic, political and social democracy more broadly. By connecting everyday educational practices with critical theories of the conditions of possibility within and beyond institutions, we discover a rich range of critical tools for rebuilding confidence in learning as a practice of freedom (hooks 2004). The people’s historian Howard Zinn already pointed to this long ago:
I am not sure what a revolution in the academy will look like, any more than I know what a revolution in the society will look like. I doubt it will take the form of some great cataclysmic event. More likely, it will be a process, with periods of tumult and quiet, in which we will, here and there, by ones and twos and tens, create pockets of concern inside old institutions, transforming them from within. There is no great day of reckoning to work toward. Rather, we must now begin to liberate those patches of ground on which we stand—to ‘vote’ for a new world (as Thoreau suggested) with our whole selves all the time, rather than moments carefully selected by others. (Zinn 1997, 508)

Notes

1. The Browne Review had a budget of £120,000, apparently £68,000 of which was spent on the research. The evidence base was a single survey administered to 80 school students, 40 parents, 40 full-time university students and 18 part-time university students. Answers to questions were given with reference to a maximum tuition fee of £6000, rather than the present maximum fee of £9000. For the report, see Browne (2010). See Collini (2010, 2012); Holmwood and Bhambra (2012) and McGettigan (2011) for further commentary. The UK government’s White Paper, Students at the Heart of the System, was loosely based on the results of this review, Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (2011).

2. Giroux (2013), borrowing a concept from Didi-Huberman, describes disimagination as a process by which ‘institutions, discourses and other modes of representation … undermine the capacity of individuals to bear witness to a different and critical sense of remembering, agency, ethics and collective resistance’. David Graeber (2013) has elsewhere argued, more appropriately for this context, that political imagination is being foreclosed through a materialised ‘apparatus of hopelessnes’.

3. Fielding and Moss (2011) draw heavily on the notion of ‘education-in-the-broadest-sense’ in their work on radical democratic education.

4. Dewey once argued that philosophy could be ‘defined as the general theory of education’, insofar as, on the one hand, philosophy’s concern with ‘fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellow [human beings]’ is toothless without educational practices to make it a matter of public concern and, on the other hand, such practice – regardless of its disciplinary location – tends ‘to become a routine empirical affair unless its aims and methods are animated by … a broad and sympathetic survey of its place in contemporary life’, which is a philosophical problem (Dewey 1916, 331).

5. There is presently no inventory or archive of contemporary educational struggles and movements in global perspective, and none comprehensive historically. For US-American and European perspectives, see Wallerstein and Starr (1971) and BoRen (2001). Partial chronologies and records can be found on the site of the International Student Movement (http://ism-global.net/protests_worldwide_june2012) and on the Edu-Factory website (http://www.edu-factory.org/wp/).

6. I am grateful for the advice of an anonymous reviewer on this point.

7. For more on post-structuralist readings of anarchistic thought and politics, see May (1994) or DeWitt (2000).

8. The Research Exercise Framework (REF) is the UK’s national assessment of research quality, which has taken place in different forms since 1986 (in 1989,
1992, 1996, 2001 and 2008). For further information, see the official REF website at http://www.ref.ac.uk/. For competing analyses of its purpose and legitimacy, see Martin (2011) and Smith, Ward, and House (2011).

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