Critical dialogues for learning and technology: in, against and beyond the neoliberal university

Learning in the age of digital reason, by P. Jandrić, Rotterdam, Sense, 2017, 422 pages, Paperback $54.00, ISBN 978-94-6351-075-2

Dialogue is the encounter between men [beings], mediated by the world, in order to name the world. (Freire, 1972, p. 88)

We live in the epoch of digital reason, which has significantly altered the traditional order of things. In our epoch, yesterday’s institutions will either become slaves to corporate capitalism, or they will significantly transform in order to maintain an active role in the co-creation of the present and future. Political, social and economic pressures strongly favour the first option. (Peters & Jandrić, 2018, p. 5)

Crises and contexts

In our contemporary conjuncture of ongoing, integrated and intensifying crises – most urgently those of potential nuclear conflict and Capitalocene’s climate chaos, resource depletion and environmental degradation (Chomsky, 2017a; Moore, 2016) – Learning in the age of digital reason speaks to the need for engaged, committed and critical responses from across and beyond academia (including to the crisis of (higher) education [Hall, 2013]).

An inherently and increasingly authoritarian globalised neoliberalism, viciously anti-democratic in essence, is a central cause of rising inequalities, oppression, repression and exploitation. In such contexts, there is an urgency for public intellectuals to speak out and act, against intersectional oppressions and stark, widening inequalities, and with and for social movements and struggles resisting neoliberalism and developing genuinely democratic and emancipatory alternatives to it (Giroux, 2017a).

The neoliberal (and contested) university

A prominent role in capitalism’s hegemonic system is played by a higher education sector that is increasingly neoliberalised and neoliberalising (of itself, those labouring within it, and the wider society it both shapes and is shaped by), as the university is commodified and financialised, managerialised and metricised (Hall & Winn, 2017). However, this ‘academic capitalist knowledge/learning regime’ (Cantwell & Kauppinen, 2014) was, is and will be contested. Jandrić’s book situates itself in this position of tension within the contemporary university, as a contribution to such urgently needed contestation – one that is centred on (re)conceptions of education as a public and common good (Giroux, 2017b). Jandrić and his co-contributors evolve a series of overlapping dialogues as contributions to producing the critical knowledges, values and desires, that is (inter)subjectivities and relations, which are necessary for radically different ways of learning and thinking, doing research and education in an increasingly digitally mediated world.

Dialogue and dialogues

There’s insufficient space in a short review to adequately engage with the intentionally wide-ranging and post/trans-disciplinary content of a book of 400 pages, formed of contributions
Learning in the age of digital reason is framed as historicising ‘our current views on human learning, and experiments with collective knowledge making and the relationships between theory and practice’ (p. 361). Its focus is on theory and practice as praxis; on digital media and learning, the relationships between education and technology, and critical digital literacies and the co-production of knowledges. Beyond that, I’ll let the contents and contributors speak for themselves and focus on two related and distinguishing aspects of the book, that – going beyond its content alone – speak to its potential value as a critical engagement for and with ongoing struggles, for eco-social justice and democracy: the focus on dialogue(s), not merely as a focus of the book’s content, but as central to its format – and perhaps most importantly, as the critical methodological process of the book’s production, and the wider engagements connected to this.

Learning in the age of digital reason provides a welcome, engaged and engaging alternative to the standard academic monograph or edited collection. The chapters are not a typical series of interviews either. Rather, they are ‘conversations’ in Jandrić’s terminology, in which he has a significant voice that serves to connect different chapters, coherently facilitating and shaping the book. The process of production of the book itself is worthy of comment – and, as a central aspect of and beyond that – its focus on critical notions of dialogue. Here dialogue is understood as collective exploration and co-creation or co-production of knowledges and relations, and vitally, as focused on an orientation to praxis for liberation (Freire & Shor, 1987). As speaking to, and going beyond, resistance. As also concerning the provision and discussion of lived and possible alternatives; of radical hope, imagination and democracy (Amsler, 2015; Khasnabish & Haiven, 2017).

A range of critical educators/activists/theorists (including Freire, Gadamer, Bakhtin, Bohm, Buber and Habermas [Smith, 2001]), set dialogue at the heart of their practice and praxis. While their conceptions of dialogue vary, central to all is its role in critical human creativity; as contextualised, question-posing and problem-solving (Phillips, 2011). That is, as an ongoing, participatory and deeply educational, process of mutual learning and knowledge co-production. A process of movement and encounter, always incomplete/unfinished, focused on evolving ‘genuine and creative collective consciousness’ (Bohm, 1997). As such, dialogue is conceived of, variously, as a value, as a means or process, and as an end or objective (Taylor, 1994).

The pedagogical as political

Critical conceptions of dialogue foreground the pedagogical as political and the political as pedagogical, with education thus explicitly conceived of as non-neutral – as politically committed (Pizzolato & Holst, 2017). The book’s contributors are concerned with collectively exploring the historically situated realities of our contemporary crises. Doing so as an ongoing, always unfinished, process – a process that itself is prefigurative, reflecting the values and objectives espoused (Amsler, 2015). One aimed at collectively evolving understandings of ourselves, others, the word and the world, and the relationships between them, allied to an appreciation of our individual and collective agency, and an orientation to act in and on the world to transform it in the interests of eco-social justice. Aimed at fostering the knowledges and values, subjectivities and relations necessary for combatting and moving beyond contemporary, intersectional oppressions, repressions and exploitations; doing so, in the interests of emancipation, genuine substantive and participatory democracy and the building of a more eco-socially just world.

It is these critical/radical conceptions and practices of dialogue – and their prefiguration throughout Jandrić’s project – that make the book stand out. The process of the book’s production is itself (at least partially) organic and dialogical; with the book having been developed
through building networks of co-contributors, and incorporating aspects of their proposals and suggestions as to its content and form.

**Co-constitutive dialogues**

The book encompasses three sets of overlapping dialogues, each shaping the others:

- there are the dialogues between Jandrić and each of his co-contributors both ahead of and that form the separate chapters (a number of the former having previously been published in various forms);
- these dialogues are connected by and through Jandrić, with each informing subsequent others. As such, coming together as wider dialogues of all co-contributors within the framing of the book and the wider engagements of its production process;
- and there are the ongoing and future dialogues with readers (of the already published articles that have flowed from the process, as well as with the book itself) and with others engaging with the content/the process of production/the contributors. Robin’s (2016) appreciation of the reader or ‘audience’ as ‘co-creators’ seems most relevant; ‘not only are we talking about the audience as a recipient or reader of the text, but we are also, necessarily, talking about the audience as an independent, autonomous, and equally original and creative, co-creator of the text’. This resonates with the intentions of the authors; as the various members of their ‘audience’ become co-producers of knowledge and relations, through their active, ongoing, dialogical engagements.

The afterword emphasises Jandrić’s ongoing dialogical intentions. ‘Bringing Voices Together: The Uncanny Art of Contemporary Research – Conversation between Petar Jandrić, Christine Sinclair, and Hamish MacLeod’ serves to foreground a critical methodological process of continued reflection on the dialogical production and intent of the book – and the wider engagements this has, and will, involve. As such, both the process of producing, as well as the final format of the book (in addition to its actual content) serve to prefigure or foreshine the very kind of critical dialogical approach to education, associated with critical pedagogy/popular education, that many of its co-contributors identify with and espouse.

**Subjectivities and relations: the emotional and affective**

Two vital aspects of a focus on dialogue are its foregrounding of

- education as not merely producing knowledges and values, but people; identities, (inter)-subjectivities and social relations;
- and as a central component of such, the emotional, psychological, affective and embodied, as well as the behavioural and cognitive, aspects of learning, teaching and research.

Dialogue ‘entails a particular kind of relationship and interaction. In this sense it is not so much a specific communicative form of question and answer, ‘but at heart a kind of social relation that engages its participants’ (Burbules, 1993:19)’ (Smith, 2001). It ‘entails certain virtues and emotions’, that include concern, trust, respect, appreciation, affection and hope (Smith, 2001).

**Challenging academic paradigms**

Treating education as meta/trans-disciplinary in nature, Jandrić’s intention is to dialogue within, across and beyond academic disciplines – where knowledges (and relations) are far
too often siloed and rendered inaccessible to a broader public. It is a refreshing change to see amongst standardised academic texts – and, together with Jandrić’s most recent book (Peters & Jandrić, 2018), stands alongside dialogical and co-operative works such as Kane (2001) and Hall and Winn (2017) as examples of how things can be done critically and constructively while still working within mainstream academic writing and publishing. Which is to acknowledge, not deny, that this is inevitably a position of tension/contradiction. In practising what it preaches, the book serves to focus attention on the centrality of dialogue to critical educational theories, practices and relations – as contributing to, not only the struggle over and for higher education and the formal education sector more broadly, but wider societal, community and social movement struggles.

**Limitations**

It would have been fascinating, when the concept is pivotal to the book, to find a greater exploration and problematisation as to the different forms and approaches to dialogue. It would also have been interesting if the tensions, acknowledged by Jandrić in the final chapter, were further explored throughout the various dialogues, which the iterative structure might have enabled. Especially with regard to the inherent contradictions of publishing an attempt at a very different sort of academic book through a mainstream academic publisher (Asher, 2017).

There could be a wider range of radical perspectives and diverse contributors to the book – and a greater emphasis on, for instance, the feminist, the decolonial, and our relations with other species. Albeit Jandrić explicitly admits that the book tends towards male and western contributors, with the process of compilation and (partial) co-construction having led in this direction – suggesting himself that this is not ideal, but also that it is an outcome of co-construction. The book might also have benefitted from a more explicit pulling together of the various themes and linkages (both convergences and divergences) within it – but that perhaps is the role of the engaged (and dialogical) reader?

However, there are always limits and limitations to any book project – and it is true for all of us in our writings and dialogues, that we bring certain networks and knowledges, biases and contexts, to our engagements – often much less transparently? Jandrić not only acknowledges these weaknesses and lacuna, but opens up the possibility of exploring such issues through further dialogues, as part of what he clearly views as a continuing, always incomplete and unfinished project. What would be a most useful addition, especially in a book of this length, depth and complexity, is an index.

**Reflections for further dialogue**

The book’s scholar/practitioners admirably and inspirationally perform the role of engaged, committed and critical public intellectuals that Chomsky (2017b) and Giroux (2013), amongst others, have called for. As such, providing vitally needed responses to the mainstream works of system intellectuals far too commonly found in contemporary academia and politics (Inglis, 2014), that in consequence if not necessarily always intent serve to support the evolving neoliberal status quo. Both the critical, dialogical, co-production process and the content of the book speak to the pedagogical as inherently political (and vice versa) as it explores the different meanings and possibilities of learning teaching and research, thinking/imaging and acting, living and relating, as mediated by technology and the digital in the contemporary world.

Through doing so, Jandrić and his co-contributors open up dialogues that engage with and contribute to radical struggles within and for, against and beyond the university (Asher, 2015;
This book lies in the current system of knowledge production and dissemination – it is published by a decent publisher, its expected audience is within academia, and its author actively participates in the mainstream political economy of (academic) publishing. This book also works against the current system of knowledge production and dissemination – it deliberately challenges academic canons and disciplinary borders, and many conversations are pre-published and freely available online. Finally, this book looks beyond the current system of knowledge production and dissemination – it seeks new forms of collective intelligence, and hopes to open new opportunities for individual and collective action. (p. 379)

**PS:** It seems worth emphasising, that this review takes up Jandrić’s invitation to engage in further ‘conversations’. That it is intended as a continuation of, and contribution to, the dialogical process that Jandrić and his interlocutors have engaged in; an attempt to critically engage with the spirit and intent of the book, that hopefully itself serves as a further invitation for others – to future dialogues with both the content and ethos of *Learning in the age of digital reason*.

**Note**

1. See book preview at [https://www.sensepublishers.com/media/3213-learning-in-the-age-of-digital-reason.pdf](https://www.sensepublishers.com/media/3213-learning-in-the-age-of-digital-reason.pdf).

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