

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

Educational Utopias and Dystopias: Reinventing Education in an Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Module

Will Curtis
University of Warwick

Reinventing Education is a module that ran for the first time at the University of Warwick in 2013/4. Offered through the university's *Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning* (IATL), it provides students from any undergraduate degree with the opportunity to study in an innovative and interdisciplinary manner. In its first year, students from a wide range of subject areas—including Maths, Politics, Theatre Studies, Philosophy, English, Physics and Sociology—came together to explore questions about what education is and what it might be. The module began by introducing students to the ideas of children and young people who had been asked to reflect on *The School I'd Like*—as part of a *Guardian* competition, conducted originally in 1967 and repeated in 2001. As 15 year old Angela's comments indicate, this was a very fruitful starting point indeed:

The School I'd Like.....

This place of learning should never be somewhere to fear, nor should it restrict free speech and ideas, or be somewhere which will strip you of the confidence and individuality

you need to succeed in life. School is there to prepare you for your future life, not to make you scared of it. My ideal school is a community, which upholds your strong points and overcomes your weak points. Teachers should always know how much they should be involved in your private life, but they refrain from depriving you of a life outside school untainted by the shackles of school work. What is education if it is not about people? If results are what the government wants, then replace every child with a robot each one the same, producing the same work, the same results year after year. Education should be working to make people valuable citizens, not so called "valuable statistics." (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003, p. 77)

Reinventing Education adopts the explicit perspective that current educational structures and practices were designed for late 19th/ early 20th century requirements—and that the current

Will Curtis
University of Warwick
w.j.curtis@warwick.ac.uk

schooling system is no longer appropriate for 21st century ways of living. Transformations in society, culture, economy, politics, employment and knowledge require us to fundamentally rethink how we perceive and organise education. Building on existing interdisciplinary literature, the module

- Education is for children and young people between the approximate ages of five to 18
- Learning takes place in specific institutions at specific times
- Schools are good for children and for society
- There are clear dichotomies within education—teacher/ learner; formal/ informal; assessor/ assessed; school/ college/ university

The module aims to encourage students to:

- Understand a range of radical critiques and alternative theorisations of education
- Examine real alternatives to traditional state models of education
- Think about how recent socio-cultural, economic and political changes impact on educational structures and practices
- Consider and develop alternative approaches to education, making use of existing theories and research

challenges existing modes of delivery and content and explores alternative educational approaches. Through a range of activities and discussions, it encourages students to reflect critically on their own educational experiences. It encourages students to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions, for example, that:

- Reflect on their own experiences as learners in a variety of different contexts and settings
- Think about what education could and should be

During the course, students examine influential theories and research that critique educational structures and practices. Often for the first time, they encounter alternative educational values, models, strategies and approaches. They are continually asked to reflect on their own educational experiences to date and to discuss with one another from the varying perspectives of their different disciplines. Over the 10 weeks of the course, the following themes are explored:

1. The meaning and purpose of education
2. What's wrong with schooling?
3. The nature of learning
4. Learning webs – widespread, informal, voluntary and lifelong experiences
5. Education, transformation and subversion
6. What are universities? What could they be?
7. Assessment reassessed
8. Education, democracy and culture
9. Technological advances – new

threats and opportunities

10. Educational futures – utopias and dystopias

In the first year of the module, one of the two assessments proved able to stimulate particularly interesting work. Drawing on class discussions and wider reading, students were asked to create an account of an educational future—a utopian or dystopian vision which would act as a device to critique our current practices. Students were encouraged to be as creative and original as possible—both in terms of the ideas they articulated and the ways they presented their work. After the final week, the group came together for a round-table discussion. Each student presented their work and the group talked together about implications, commonalities and differences. What follows are two very different (but equally forceful, engaging and thought-provoking) submissions—Charlotte Thomas’s utopian *Education for Sustainability* and Alizée Moreau’s dystopian *A Zombie Apocalypse*.

**Education for Sustainability
by Charlotte Thomas**

Disclaimer: The following is a vision of a utopian education system. It would only be successful within a society whose central values included autonomy, compassion and reciprocity. It could not survive in a time, like ours, where competition, identification and segregation have been normalized and apathy is customary.

I Vision

Imagine, if you will, a simple and comfortable building set around a courtyard, in acres of countryside but still within reach of metropolitan activity. All over this space, young people of ages six

to 16, their teachers, some parents and other members of the local community are working together on aspects of a long-term study of food. This ongoing project involves the students in a variety of activities. The students devise the activities with help from the teachers and other adults and participation is voluntary. Such is the breadth of the category of “food” that there is no student who cannot find some avenue that interests them. The example of the tea exercise illustrates the incredible range of options available. The activities obviously change according to the children who are devising them year on year, however some that have endured include:

- global gardens: the maintenance of a vegetable patch and donation of its produce to less fortunate members of the community, carried out in partnership with another school in the country and one overseas. The students stay in touch via fortnightly video-conferencing and a blog, which they update regularly with pictures, videos and posts relating to their respective gardens.
- foraging Fridays: a club run by a mixture of students and locals, whose task it is to scour the hedgerows and footpaths for edible delights and bring back both their spoils and their wisdom to the communal kitchens.

There is no “curriculum” of the traditional kind in this school. Learning is guided by 4 principles; play, interdisciplinarity, integration and democracy. It is acknowledged that the observation of

these values, as opposed to the passive and abstracted assimilation of 12 separate subjects' worth of facts, is far more conducive to the development of young people who are healthy, considerate, competent and engaged. The calendar is organized into long and short-term themed projects. Short-term projects last for half a term (six weeks) and each one is centred on a theme, past examples of which include electricity, masks, football, the sea, storytelling and laughter. These themes are decided upon by a large, rotating panel made up of students, teachers and members of the community in bi-termly meetings. Anyone is free to offer up an idea and then it is the job of the panel to evaluate its practical feasibility and creative potential in a constructive manner. The children's views are important and their criticisms are taken seriously. Panels are conducted according to consensus procedure and the children are used to speaking out, facilitating and participating in reasonable, fair discussions about what they learn and how they learn it.

Virtually all matters of school policy are dealt with in this fashion and the students, staff and locals are proud to acknowledge that certain decisions which have come to define the way the school is run have been reached via this democratic method. The most notable of these include the school's position on admissions and assessment. Students are able to be enrolled at the school from the age of six and are free to remain there until the age of 18, though the recommended age is 16. However, should a child above the age of 14 wish to pursue an alternative path, for example an apprenticeship, job, specialised study or travel, the school

community would do its utmost to support them in their efforts and make that transition as simple and stress-free as possible, utilising its strong ties with the local community and further afield. There is no place here for assessment as a tool to measure educational establishments in terms of their "achievements" and grades. As such, there are no formal exams or assessments in the school. Students are monitored to ensure that they are maintaining tolerable levels of literacy and numeracy, however it is expected that most children will learn these skills through applied situations; such is the nature of project-based learning. Every student has a personal record, an informal log of their group and individual participation in the current project, which they fill out at the end of each week and review once a fortnight with a parent and another adult who has been directly involved with their recent activity.

The purpose of these reviews is to ensure that a) students are enjoying their school-life and what they are working on, b) students don't run out of ideas to pursue/helpers to assist their learning, and c) any significant gaps in a student's learning are identified and discussed and eventually overcome.

The aforementioned panel meetings are enormously productive and empowering and, as well as innovative policies, they have influenced material developments in the school and grounds. One majorly successful modification of the landscape has been the re-appropriation of the courtyard. This is now the central hub of the school. A permanent, transparent glass canopy now covers the entirety of this space (which is enclosed by the four inner walls of the main building) so that the sky

and weather are always visible. There are two open plan kitchen areas, one at either end of the courtyard. This is where all the members of the school community prepare and eat their lunch each day. The courtyard walls and kitchen units are dotted with an ever-expanding collection of posters and annotations pertaining to the uses of crockery, utensils and appliances, as well as charts and diagrams detailing the nutritional values of different food types and a plethora of recipes, all of which have been researched and designed by the children.

In this space the children are encouraged to experiment and take responsibility for their own dietary requirements and they are free to prepare, cook and eat their food with whomever they choose. Lunch may be consumed in one of the multiple comfortable, informal seating areas in the courtyard, or outside in the grounds or in a quieter space in the main building. It is of the utmost importance that the children feel comfortable, confident and respected in this most basic of human routines, in order to be able to flourish in a broader sense.

The capacity for unadulterated fun that is afforded by the flexibility of the “curriculum” and the enormous range of opportunities that the connections with the community yield, as well as the individual and collective confidence and responsibility that stem from engagement in the democratic process, are qualities that have led this school and the system it represents to have been championed on a local and national level.

II Summary & Justification

This module has constantly asked us, both explicitly and implicitly, what education is

actually for. I have come to the conclusion that it should be for supporting the development of young people into moral, social, responsible, empowered beings. I have presented a picture of a utopia that is far removed from contemporary reality but I think it is possible to conceive of a school that is based on community as opposed to individualism, co-operation as opposed to competition. Playing games and learning through group projects in stimulating settings and with companions of all ages and backgrounds would teach children the importance of respect, compassion and autonomy, all of which are surely fundamental requirements in the struggle for social and environmental sustainability. We can't imagine what our children's lives will look like but we can try to equip them with the best possible tools for sustainability, which involves, above all, encouraging them to inhabit and appreciate their agency and their interdependency. Why not start with a cup of tea?

References (utilised)

- Burke, C. & Grosvenor, I. (2003). *The school I'd like: Children and young peoples' reflections on an education for the 21st Century*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Birkett, D. (2011, 3 May). The children's manifesto. *The Guardian*. From: <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2011/may/03/school-i-would-like-childrens-manifesto>

A Zombie Apocalypse

by Alizée Moreau

This is the story of an apocalypse. A zombie apocalypse. That's the best kind of dystopia, is it not? I know you know how the story goes. All of the zombie books, movies, series, they all merge into one, don't they? We all know the tropes, we all know what will happen. Night of the Living Dead, the Walking Dead, Dawn of the Dead, Shaun of the Dead. Dead, dead, dead. But the problem is the lack of death: it's the Undead.

It starts like this. We wake up one day. Life is good. Families—nuclear families, never divorced, complex ones—have breakfast, take children to school; the ordinary is ordinary, roses are red and bacon smells good. And then something goes wrong. The living die and the dead won't die. Natural order is reversed. And the good guy protects his family, no matter what, with an unhealthy helping of American tea parties and reassuring conservatism, while trying to figure out what makes us human and smashing skulls open faster than students do beer cans.

You know what a zombie is. A lifeless body, brought back to life by a deadly virus. A soulless creature whose decaying carcass shelters only enough brain activity to experience the most basic of needs—insatiable hunger—and none of the emotions, or indeed rationality, by which we define humanity.

This is set a long time from now. Who knows how long? It's the story of an apocalypse we know: an apocalypse staring us right in the face, but which our eyes won't see. Zombies we know, zombies we are, in a Benjaminian narrative of blinding progress.

It's all because of society, but it started in schools. You know how, in zombie movies, you always see abandoned schools with broken windows, discarded toys and bleak lighting revealing colourful walls and abstract drawings? It didn't happen that way. Well, not everywhere. Some schools were shut down, sure. Quite a lot of them actually. They called it centralization. But that's not the worst fate that can befall a school, as it turned out. The worst is what happened to those schools that did stay open. The ones that were "efficient" and "productive" and made the "most employable" of students. Those schools, they made it big. They got to the top of the rankings. They had the hardest entry tests and so they grew larger and vaster as grey cement covered the wallpaper flowers that were too distracting to students and not conducive to the parcelling out of good little lawyers and doctors and engineers and nuclear physicists for the good of King and country.

Normalise. Standardise.

The curriculum was national. There was a *numerus clausus* for each profession—and yes, a lot of Latin to make it sound smart and elitist and like a good idea. It included science, business, finance, and no humanities. After all, being human is a hindrance to good business. "It's not personal, it's just business" they say. Who would like to employ emotional humans? They learned to calculate market projections and studied the physics of teleportation for the corporations who taught them at school and tested them, and selected them. Their values were profit, competition and normativity. Good little

cogs filed and sterilized to fit snugly and seamlessly into the Metropolis of a hierarchized society—one where the nation came on top and everything that didn't fit was done abroad, away, we don't care where.

Normalise. Standardise.

No emotion, no humanities, no creativity. Bright children dutifully disciplined, standardised normalized, zombified. The sparks of empathy, the embers of originality, trampled like cigarette butts in Southern France and extracted like goldstones by a robotic arm, precisely, methodically, surgically. The child goes to school, day after day. Grey walls, no teacher, computer booths, wardens. Don't cheat, don't talk, be better than others and aim for the top. Despise your colleagues, develop your greed, breed that single hunger fed by those transnational teachers of efficiency and profit who come into your school and shape, and fashion, and produce you to the highest of their Fordian standards. Isolation constructs you, the hyper-individual, the precious consciousness whose only particularity is the illusion of difference and the brainwash of standardisation for the preying of products.

Normalise. Standardise.

The one and only truth forced through relaxing jaws to make docile bodies. Kinetic, visual, auditory, who cares. One teaching, one program, one monochrome life. The last bastion of the blob has surrendered to the Goves and the Goves gave in to the Moloch of society.

Normalise. Standardise.

The school of no thought for the one answer to discourage the lateral thinker. No space, no time, no thinking in the constant nag and pull of 100% attendance, 100% attention, 100% control of your thought process to process your thoughts into the undemocratic sameness of apathetic tragedy. Math, finance, business, psychology of the markets, math, finance, business, psychology of the markets, boring and repetitive, continuous hammering of harming unilateral teaching amputating your curiosity and your creativity.

Normalise. Standardise.

And so you produce and reproduce the society that shuffles along the straight and narrow and elitist path of life in bold banker pre-fabricated strides. No empathy, no creativity, only the most basic of needs—greed. Zombies with no humanity, no difference, no critical thinking for creative solutions to cyclical crises for a sad society of mythical meritocracy.

References (utilised)

- Abbasi, K. (2011). A riot of divergent thinking. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 104(10).
- Benjamin, W. (2009). *On the concept of history*. New York: Classic America Print.
- Blishen, E. (1969). *The school that I'd like*. Baltimore: Penguin Books.
- Panorama. (2013, 6 June). Cash for questions undercover. [Television special]. London: British Broadcasting

- Corporation.
- Fisher, T. (2012). The myth of school autonomy: Centralisation as the determinant of English educational politics. *Forum*, 54(2), pp. 231-45.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Pantheon.
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gatto, J. T. (1991, 25 July). Take back your education. *The Wall Street Journal*. From: <http://www.educationrevolution.org/blog>
- Ginsberg, A. (1956). *Howl, Kaddish and other poems*. London: Penguin Classics, pp. 1-11.
- Gove, M. (2013, 23 March). I refuse to surrender to the Marxist teachers hell-bent on destroying our schools: Education Secretary berates ‘the new enemies of promise’ for opposing his plans. *The Daily Mail*. Available from: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/>
- Horkheimer, M. & Adorno, T. W. (2002) *Dialectic of enlightenment: Philosophical fragments*. (G. Schmid Noerr, Ed.), Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Leadbeater, C. (2000). *The weightless society: Living in the new economy bubble*. New York: Texere.
- Sternberg, R. J. (1999). *Handbook of creativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Watt, N. (2013, 27 Nov). Boris Johnson invokes Thatcher spirit with greed is good speech. *The Guardian*. Available from: <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/>

Author Details (as managing author)

Will Curtis is Director of Part Time and 2+2 Programmes. Address: Centre for Lifelong Learning, University of Warwick, Coventry. CV4 7AL. Email: W.J.Curtis@warwick.ac.uk
Website: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/>

© Copyright 2014. The author Will Curtis assigns to Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives, and to educational and non-profit institutions a non-exclusive license to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction, provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The author also grants a non-exclusive right to Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives to publish this document in full on the World Wide Web. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the author.