

Pedagogy of doubt

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Sometimes when a group of people aren't listening to each other, when they are only interested in talking, I run an exercise I call 'cross-purposes reporters'. Each person must think of a question that they genuinely want to know the answer to, and assume that the answers are held by the others in the group. They are reporters, and they must draft an article in fifteen minutes with the responses to these questions from the others. They are set free, and off they go, asking their questions insistently, recording answers fervently, pressing people for clarity. Of course, since the others in the group are also reporters, they can be hard to get answers from - these people just want to get answers to their own questions. The louder, more confident people in the group will still dominate, but now domination means commanding the role of questioner and facilitator and note taker. For fifteen minutes, people make a world where everyone is intensely interested in supporting everyone else to speak and act.

It's an imperfect exercise, a crude tool. Afterwards, many people just switch back and listening doesn't remain the value of the class, now that it's not being dictated. Only in rare cases do people really reflect upon their own values and ways of acting, and how much they personally create an atmosphere of competition. This reminds me of something bell hooks writes about. She recalls a time when she was unable to take one of her regular classes, and a substitute teacher came in to teach the class for the week. When she returned, the students told her that they'd hated the teaching style of the substitute teacher, and felt that they'd been dominated and controlled. hooks asked them what they had done about this, and they said they had done nothing. This was a destabilising moment for hooks, because it revealed that the radical pedagogy she was practicing was being 'imposed' on the students. They apparently did not have the ability

to enforce it themselves, perhaps they didn't even really understand it. This is the sense in which my reporters exercise is limited - it enforces new values on a class and then tries to retroactively get people to reflect on their experience of operating under that control. People have only been acting as they have been told to.

I never found any kind of answer to the hooks problem until October this year, when I was teaching a course in radical pedagogy for the Learning Co-op, and two of the people in the class, Archie and Effy, created an exercise which seemed to tackle it head-on. This exercise we call the 'productivity exercise'. The class is put into pairs, and everyone is given five minutes.

In some pairs, one person takes something from the other person as collateral (like their jacket or their phone). Then they tell the other that to get it back, the person must make something. The one in control can decide what that thing is - it might be a poem, or something from folded paper.

In other pairs, the pair must make something together in the time, which can be anything.

In the third set of pairs, the pair can make something in the time but they don't have to.

In the fourth set of pairs, the pair must do nothing, by mutual enforcement.

After the exercise, people show each other what they have made, and reflect on how the things they produced reflect the conditions of production that they were under. People generally compare some of the conditions to real life conditions. The first scenario seems most clearly to mirror 'work', where your capacity to keep yourself alive is held ransom until you

create something. The second is a kind of limited freedom, in fact the form that a lot of so-called radical pedagogy takes, where there is an external objective but some liberty of process. The third is license or freedom, and pretty unusual in any classroom or work setting. And the fourth again reflects work or school, clock-watching, sitting fidgeting through boredom and nothingness.

The exercise lays out and gets people to practice acting under a range of conditions, and allows some kind of direct comparison of the modes of action that are encouraged in different scenarios. For some reason I can't quite place, the productivity exercise changes the atmosphere in a class, everyone becomes engaged in critique, because it's all been laid out, all the small forms of control and how they bleed into everything, stemming from all the large forms of domination operating in society. It's similar to what happens when you run an exercise from Augusto Boal, where people go and stand in what they perceive to be the most powerful place in the room, and then in the least powerful place. For the remainder of the class, everyone is aware of who is standing in those places, and where they are placing themselves - the way that power operates is no longer consigned to outside the classroom, and becomes something that people might attempt to control themselves.

This still leaves me with the problem that the reporters exercise doesn't solve, though I'm not sure how to name that problem. It seems to have something to do with learning humility, or learning how to find the correct relationship between doubt and confidence, or questions and answers. When Che Guevara wrote that 'society as a whole must be converted into a huge school', the implication is not only that we change the mode of how knowledge is made, but that we change as people, especially in how we experience critique and doubt without letting it lead to inaction or become crippling. When Septima Clark and others at the Highlander Centre in Tennessee led the great literacy campaign for civil rights in the South of the US on the principle of 'Each One Teach One', the strategy was not purely a numbers game of exponentiality, but a total change in how people related to one another, and how they thought about learning and teaching as a part of their movement.

Such movements also bring to the fore considerations about what people value and ask

them to act out their values, not just think about them. Sometimes at the beginning of a class I do a go-round where people introduce themselves. I don't give much instruction - and generally people say something about where they're from, and where they work, and some justification for why they are present. I then ask folk to go round again, introducing themselves as if they are someone else, perhaps someone who they wish they were a little more like at times. That person can be real or fictional. In the second round of introductions we learn strange things about each other - first the things that we doubt in ourselves, and secondly the things that we value (but perhaps struggle to find in ourselves). These values seem to be the ones that must be explored by any truly radical pedagogy - the things that we feel we must realise but find lacking.

Which is all to say that a pedagogy of doubt is about realising how much we have to learn, and being able to say so. It's losing interest in demonstrating our proficiency, and gaining interest in everything else. Most of all, it is to say that the values of excessive confidence that we are encouraged to embody in a capitalist society are poor values, and that the solution to depression and bad self-esteem is not to fake certainty, but rather to engage in radical doubt and critique, collectively, and with the aim of finding things that are truly new and can give us real, humble, freedom.

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If you are interested in further discussions about pedagogy, get in touch with us via www.catscradle.school.