

How to be a Radical Educator in an Epoch of Incredulity

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Introduction

On a recent flight from Copenhagen to Frankfurt, I read a brief article in the *International New York Times* about finding one's place in life. In her article, Druckerman writes about a commencement speech she delivered at the Paris College of Art in which she sought to reassure a new batch of graduates by telling them, 'You will find your place... somewhere in the world, there's a gap shaped just like you. Once you'll find it, you'll slide right in'.¹ Despite the uplifting nature of her words, it was probably hard for some of the young people listening to Druckerman not to feel somewhat skeptical, especially those harbouring the ambition to position themselves as radical educators.

In order for teachers of English to act as radical educators they need to engage in certain practices whose ultimate purpose is that of reforming the current educational system. Radical educators question the norm, have the intellectual courage to undermine entrenched professional and institutional practices, and employ critical thinking to change the system from within. Radical educators champion creativity and innovation; they rebel against the factory model of education by utilising pedagogies that might not sit comfortably with those in authority.² These pedagogies are partly the result of teachers' research engagement, their inquiry into successful classroom practices and effective modes of teaching and learning. According to John Hattie, 'the greatest effects on student learning occur when teachers become learners of their own teaching, and when students become their own teachers'.³ Radical thought within education is based on challenging the way things have been done for the past few centuries, methods that in some cases are unjust to many students. In fact, Ken Robinson claims 'that many highly-talented,

brilliant, creative people think they're not, because the thing they were good at at school wasn't valued, or was actually stigmatized.⁴ Radical educators cultivate a growth mindset in their students and believe in the development of talent and intellect.⁵ They are politically engaged and willing to evaluate the ideology governing the subject that they teach, not assuming that education can be apolitical. They enrich education by promoting divergence and instigating a re-evaluation of the common vision. They act as society's lighthouses, stopping the educational system from wrecking the lives and potential of its wards. However, in the contemporary educational scenario it is well-nigh impossible for teachers to receive support in their efforts to nurture radicalism.

The present seems to be an 'epoch of incredulity' in many educational contexts around the world. Whereas in Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*⁶ this incredulity is a synonym for atheism, my use of his phrase is meant to suggest how contemporary education seems to be plagued by a lack of willingness to believe in teachers and their potential to bring about change. Teachers seem to be valued for their role in furnishing young people with the knowledge and skills prioritised by increasingly utilitarian societies obsessed with economic growth and prosperity. Despite the emphasis that the educational literature places on developing students' inquisitiveness through a learner-centred pedagogy, in the classroom teachers get bogged down by curricular and assessment objectives that push them to discard any kind of idealism they might have started with in order to join a rat race that seemingly mimics the one their own students will get caught up in once they leave school and form part of the work force. Fullan and Langworthy affirm that 'whole-system change still faces significant barriers in most places. These barriers reside primarily in the student assessment, teacher evaluation and school accountability regimes that currently define success for our education systems.'⁷ In the epoch of incredulity, the challenge for teachers wishing to act as radical educators seems to be that of finding a place in which their ideas and practices can flourish. With their emphasis on practical outcomes and fixation with standardized testing, schools seem to resist such educators. This is to the detriment of teachers and students, the broader educational culture, and society in general.

The Weird, the Crazy, the Mad

Despite having published a number of books, the personal coach Jacob Nordby will mostly be remembered for a sentence that is regularly shared

on social media by those seeking inspirational quotes: 'Blessed are the weird people – poets, misfits, writers, mystics, heretics, painters and troubadours – for they teach us to see the world through different eyes'.⁸ When I first came across this sentence I was struck by the fact that despite using the verb *teach*, Nordby fails to include teachers in his list of enlightening professions. And yet, many teachers in classrooms all over the globe inspire their students on a daily basis, enabling them to understand and value the mechanics and purpose of social, cultural and physical life. However, Nordby does not seem to consider teachers sufficiently radical in their pedagogy to provide students with a fresh perspective on the world. It is as if teachers are guilty of perpetuating the collective vision that young people are expected to subscribe to through education rather than inviting them to question the status quo, employ lateral thinking, and engage in creative practices. In fact, teachers' apparent failure to help reform the existent social and political system serves as the basis for Pink Floyd's critique of education in the second part of the band's trio of songs entitled 'Another Brick in the Wall'.⁹

Like Nordby, Apple's Think Different advertising campaign celebrated the significance of those who promote radical perspectives:

Here's to the crazy ones.
The misfits.
The rebels.
The troublemakers.
The round pegs in the square holes.
The ones who see things differently.
They're not fond of rules.
And they have no respect for the status quo.
You can quote them, disagree with them,
glorify or vilify them.
About the only thing you can't do is ignore them.
Because they change things.
They push the human race forward.
While some may see them as the crazy ones,
we see genius.
Because the people who are crazy enough to think
they can change the world, are the ones who do.¹⁰

Besides a television commercial, Apple's campaign also consisted of a series of promotional posters. Ten of these are referred to as 'The Educators Set' and feature scientists, musicians, film directors and artists to promote the idea that one needs to think differently. However, just as in Nordby's sentence, none of these figures are professional classroom educators. Teachers are once again deemed lacking in terms of their ability to bring about radical change. Their daily toils in the classroom are not considered capable of reinvigorating the established order by igniting divergent thinking in their students.

The suspicion that teachers lack radicalism is what fuels the perception that they are colluding with a system that breeds conformity and homogeneity while eradicating creativity and freethinking. As the astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson explains, 'We spend the first year of a child's life teaching it to walk and talk and the rest of its life to shut up and sit down. There's something wrong there.'¹¹ Teachers are not considered weird or crazy enough to resist the system's machinations against young people's creativity. They probably were not who Kerouac had in mind when he declared,

the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars.¹²

It seems as if teachers cannot be equal to those perceived as radical as a result of inherent talent. However, as Syed indicates, this rampant talent myth is destructive because it scuppers people's motivation for change.¹³ Teachers seem to be appreciated for buttressing conventions and not for engendering unorthodox thinking and living. In a way they are meant to stifle most of their originality and act as conservatively as possible, otherwise they would be deemed a threat to young people's intellectual welfare. When they decide to become teachers they might not realize that they will have to spend their career fitting into the system's paradigm of normality. However, as Camus points out, in order for them to be normal they will have to expend tremendous amounts of energy.¹⁴ Any sense of radicalism teachers might have is extinguished by a system that expects them to be reactionary.

High Self-efficacy

Operating in an epoch of incredulity is having its toll on teachers. Their confidence in themselves as promoters of change and fresh thinking is dwindling due to the fact that they are not expected to adopt that role by a system that values homogeneity. However, if they fail to challenge the system its processes will become even more insidious and its effects even more pernicious. Hattie argues that in order for learning to be effective 'Teachers need to see themselves as change agents.'¹⁵ Reform will not take place unless teachers find the courage to position themselves as radical educators. To do this they need to reimagine their role as educators, transcending the limited definition imposed by educational authorities so as to force change from the bottom up.

To be radical educators, individuals need to first and foremost believe in their capacity to fulfil that role. Bandura's theory of self-efficacy posits that individuals who have a strong belief in their ability to succeed or attain certain goals are more likely to have increased levels of determination and be influential on others.¹⁶ Radical educators have a strong sense of purpose, a belief that they can effect change despite the limitations of operating within a system that sets numerous obstacles in their path. This is typical of people who are not held back by the seeming insignificance of an individual's life. Despite the fact that humanity lives 'on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam',¹⁷ people with high self-efficacy still believe in their ability to do meaningful things. They are not inhibited by fear or diffidence. As Coelho explains, 'You have two choices: to control your mind or to let your mind control you.'¹⁸ Overcoming fear enables the individual to harness potential: 'Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light.'¹⁹ The belief in one's potential encourages the individual to reach further and higher and this is to the benefit of all those influenced by an individual's actions. According to T. S. Eliot, 'only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go'.²⁰ Similarly, Alan Turing's character in *The Imitation Game* says that 'Sometimes it is the people who no one imagines anything of who do the things that no one can imagine.'²¹ For teachers wishing to position themselves as radical educators challenging the epoch of incredulity necessarily starts with believing in their potential to make a difference and to bring about change.

In order to be radical educators, teachers need to have faith in their capacity to do more with their careers than merely fulfil the system's expectations. In his famous Stanford commencement speech, Steve Jobs

advised the young people in his audience that

Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma — which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.²²

Teachers desiring to tap their capacity for radicalism need to develop the conviction that a radical educator is who they are meant to be. With respect to this, some inspirational quotes abounding on the Internet come to the rescue. A popular (but unverified) quote attributed to Mark Twain by the movie *The Equalizer* points out that 'The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.'²³ Once this realization hits teachers they will be able to start working to change the system from within. Arriving at this realization belatedly in their career should not discourage them. George Eliot is inaccurately credited with saying that, 'It is never too late to be what you might have been' (see Mead).²⁴ Nor should teachers be scared that they would not be able to enact the role of radical educators effectively. Elizabeth Gilbert's rough translation of a verse from *The Bhagavad-Gita* makes it clear that 'it is better to live your own destiny imperfectly than to live an imitation of someone else's life with perfection'.²⁵ Teachers who consider themselves to be made for the role of radical educators should not hold themselves back. This is crucial given that 'to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking. Don't settle.'²⁶ Radical educators are those who have developed the self-efficacy to be able to position themselves accordingly. They are teachers who firmly believe in the significance of their work as enablers of change and are thus fulfilled by it.

Conclusion

The lack of faith in teachers' radicalism seems symptomatic of the assessment-driven culture that increasingly holds sway in many educational contexts around the world. Teachers of English are chiefly valued for their contribution to a school's success in league tables and the

ranking of a country's educational system in international surveys like PISA and PIRLS. They are seen as having very little agency in terms of bringing about significant changes apart from these. Nonetheless, the resistance to such a rigid definition of what a teacher is meant to do needs to originate from teachers themselves. They need to position themselves as radical educators by believing in their capacity to effect change.

Radical educators are consumed by their divergent thinking and practices. As professionals they are convinced that 'ideas are bulletproof'²⁷ and hence know that they pose a threat to monolithic educational systems. They seemingly have taken to heart another inspirational quote, once again erroneously ascribed by the Internet to the writer Charles Bukowski when most probably belonging to the singer and novelist Kinky Friedman: 'Find what you love and let it kill you' (as cited in Spies).²⁸ To position themselves as radical educators, teachers require a high self-efficacy coupled with a blend of professional qualities that include political engagement, commitment to reform, research engagement, creativity, critical thinking, and innovation. By adopting the stance of radical educators they can bring to an end the epoch of incredulity and erode the disempowerment that for far too long has been allowed to spread widely and deeply in contemporary education.

Notes

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