

Practicing Disobedience: Transformative Education for Citizenship

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Dismantling education destroys democracy. The systematic disassembly of higher education in the United States is a direct assault on democracy. No democracy survives without an educated citizenry. Design focuses on the projection of change into the future (Mendoza & Matyok, 2012). In this type of study, questions are more prized than answers. The focus on *transformation* affects the methods and products of the areas in such a way that they are ideal locations for beginning the development of a pedagogy of student disobedience (Mendoza, 2012). Education operates as a model of the socio-political that society wishes to exist. Rather than approaching education in the United States as a vehicle for the enfranchisement of an active citizenry engaged in the processes of democracy, education is instead being framed as a private asset rather than a public good (Laibman, 2003).

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The principles of civil disobedience teach us that when systems created by human hands act to create more injustice than they prevent, we have an obligation as thinking beings to not only refuse to give aid to the injustice but to actively work to dismantle the unjust systems and create new ones (Zinn, 2003).

Disobedience as an ongoing practice requires a great deal of scaffolding, a highly developed sense of empathy, and the ability to range across knowledge sources to pull together information. As teachers, we can make our own processes visible to students, demonstrate the movement beyond identification to reconstruction, something that requires both confidence and creativity. We need to provide our students with the mechanisms for disobedient decision-making. The atrophy of tenure and the dismantling of the power of unionization has led to a situation in which direct action against academic-capitalism is dangerous. Despite these circumstances, the university maintains a unique place in society as the

guardian of truth-seeking and knowledge creation.

Design is a way of paying attention; of drawing connections between disparate information. It is an abductive process of investigation in which messy and indeterminate problems are worked in relationship to a wide variety of possible responses without the existence of a particular correct and discoverable answer. The questions that are asked change in response to the solutions presented in an iterative process that requires abilities to freely move across disciplinary territories. As the problems are so sticky, or as they have been termed 'wicked' (Buchanon, 1992), they cannot be ideally addressed without highly developed pattern recognition and analysis abilities.

Design research focuses on the projection of change into the future (Mendoza & Matyok, 2012). In this type of study, questions are more prized than answers. The focus on *transformation* affects the methods and products of the

areas in such a way that they are ideal locations for beginning the development of a pedagogy of student disobedience (Mendoza, 2012). Questioning authority becomes ontological. Design students leave no myth unchallenged. In this paper we use design discipline methodology to investigate this ongoing crisis of diminished democracy.

The specters of financial crises, budget shrinkages, and a host of other manufactured or misconstrued competitors for limited dollars are trotted out to ensure that the conversation does not move from rational economics to moral philosophy. The economic remains privileged over philosophic thought through an overextension of the metaphor of exchange. Human beings devolve to playing roles that serve the economy, rather than the having the economy serving its people. Economy becomes god, and all society worships at its alter. People at the bottom of the economic ladder become the modern day sacrifices to keep the god content. Enough sacrifice and the god will leave the rest of us alone. The greatest human potential being our capacity for thought is thus undermined; we are not *homo sapien*; rather, *homo economicus*.

As wealth becomes more tightly concentrated, efforts to maintain the domination that is required to continue resource consolidation become more strident. The maintenance of an unequal system only requires that those in charge maintain control, and the best way to do that is to encourage those who have been subjugated to participate in their own enslavement, a form of neo-slavery (Matyok, 2009). Absolute deference to authority, and the over-extension of the belief in the expertise held by authorities, occurs when there is an absence of critical and creative reasoning abilities. Critical questioning contributes to the health of democracy, not its destruction. Arendt (1970) asks what would the result have been in Nazi Germany had university

students questioned the racist narratives communicated in classrooms as truth.

Education, Democracy, and Change

The institution in the United States that was specifically designed to create the truth-searching atmosphere in which naturalized assumptions and the propaganda of power are questioned is the university. The United States is unique in its tradition of commitment to public, liberal arts education, but it is just that commitment that is at the center of the attack on American universities (Nussbaum, 2010).

Dismantling public education destroys democracy. The systematic disassembly of public higher education in the United States is a direct assault on its democracy. No democracy survives without an educated citizenry. We propose that the ongoing destruction of public education is one of the most significant social issues facing society today. We raise the issue of the proper role of public education, vis-à-vis democracy, as the primary sustainability question. All other concerns of sustainability shrink to insignificance compared to a destroyed public education structure. Without an inclusive democracy, our hopes of addressing the complex sustainable development issues at our doorstep today, will remain just that, hopes. And rarely, is hope a good guide to reasoned action. We also suggest that the proper role of public education is to instill in students an epistemological predisposition to question.

Education operates as a model of the socio-political structure that society wishes to exist. Rather than approaching education in the United States as a vehicle for the enfranchisement of an active citizenry engaged in the processes of democratic action and democracy building, higher-education is instead being framed as a private asset rather than a public good

(Laibman, 2003). Therefore, the system of inequalities that are present in American society are being produced and reproduced as a particular set of economic beliefs and become the sole guiding principles for the shaping of American education. It is an example of the belief referring to itself to establish credibility.

A representative democracy requires that those in power have a highly developed sense of empathy, as the decisions that they make affect the lives of many more people than are in the room when those decisions are made. The human imagination is developed through liberal arts education and runs its continual interaction with new information and ways of processing. It is through the pursuit of truth that the ideals of reason and freedom are advanced, a notable example being the works of the philosophers of the Enlightenment (Mills, 2000). The most cherished processes and products of a democratic society must spring from, and be continually evaluated by, a populace that is prepared to search for and critically evaluate truth claims. The process of making a democracy cannot be undertaken in ignorance or it becomes simply the meaningless activity of a spectacle. In the United States, students and faculty are busier, more active, than they have ever been, but it is all sound and fury, not creation; signifying nothing.

In the 1970's, education scholars began talking explicitly about ways of revolutionizing education. It has been widely recognized that since then the corporate supremacy movement in the United States has had a profound impact on educational systems at all levels (Altbach, Gumport, & Johnston, 2001; Bosquet, 2008; Menand, 2010). However, the possibilities for educational revolution have not diminished. Instead, their nature has changed since the height of support for radical teaching (Caine & Caine, 1997;

Postman & Weingartner, 1969; Shor & Freire, 1987). Radical teaching is, inherently, the continued exploration of counter-narrative and cannot ask for the blessing of the status quo it wishes to examine. It is well understood that the master's house cannot be torn down with the master's tools. Rather than storming the Bastille, an act of academic self-suicide, or the full embrace of melancholy and despair, there do exist alternative forms of addressing the corporate takeover of education. In this article, we seek to reestablish the conversation by identifying the realm for subversive teaching. Further, we begin to address key questions: What individual actions can work to transform the current state of affairs? What systems can be devised which do not require validation by the administrative structures through requests for their permission or participation?

Education as Consumption

As the bureaucratic arm of the university becomes the core and the academic the periphery, education has moved from an act of enfranchisement to one of consumption. Students have moved from being seekers, to being mechanisms in a mode of production; they enter at the input end, are acted upon along the assembly line of learning, and exit at the other end as outputs. This view defines them as raw materials awaiting processing with maximum efficiency in order to prepare them to take their places as economic instruments. The skills and information most suited to this type of preparation has become the guiding framework within which all educational decisions are made. Educators are complicit in their structural support of the status quo and we have helped our students and ourselves move toward mediocrity and complacency as an attitude of *getting along* has replaced the search for truth.

Utilizing a model of education that defines itself as an engine of exchange in an economic transaction brings with it a set of processes and conceptualizations incompatible with the disturbing and subversive nature of knowledge and its creation, certainly within a design approach to knowing. Primary among the many problems created by this model are the need to ensure satisfaction and to maintain quality control. Satisfaction is a pathetic goal unworthy of a place within a knowledge-building structure. The allowance for unpopularity is a trademark of an enlightened society and is rewarded in time. Silencing unpopular opinions (whether externally imposed or internally censored) stagnates growth and change – but it cannot prevent it forever. It can only make fools in the face of eternity of those who tried to stand in its way.

Quality control can only be implemented if education moves from being a process to being a thing. The *fetishization* of measurement and assessment inverts the priorities of liberal education. It continually places as the controlling mechanisms of study unthinking agents (forms, computer programs, accreditation guidelines) that allow us not to measure what we value, but lead to the assignation of value only to that which can be measured. As these tools for measurement create rigid structures based on past performance expectations, they cannot encourage, and only ever accidentally allow, innovation.

The imposition of a timeline as a framework for the transfer of a quantity of data from the minds of the faculty to the students creates a situation in which efficiency is seen as a necessary consideration. The answers to questions that we ask about efficiency in education are unworthy of consideration as the initial questions themselves were invalid. We become a society that so highly values

efficiency that we are willing to exchange the worthless if we can do so in the most efficient manner possible. Education becomes capital. Universities are committing greater amounts of their resources to considering how to move the valueless in the best possible way.

Lowered expectations exert a downward pressure and the mediocre becomes the new good. Democracy is a revolutionary form of government in which the citizens create the freedom to engage in self-governance. Graduates of such an environment offer little to challenge current structures and easily fall prey to the manipulation of ideologies of power – and that is exactly the point. Assembly lines do not invite disruption and teachers have been given the task of serving as line supervisors. The best this system can offer is the production of unthinking and unreflecting automatons committed to serving power. How stark this is when contrasted against Japanese car assembly lines that are touted as at the edge of production quality by empowering everyone along the line to stop the process if any employee sees a production or quality issue.

Citizenship Defined

The democracy we wish to see is that of a process rather than a thing obtained and guarded; therefore something moving toward stasis. This requires a citizenry that is not just busy, but actually creative. The democracy we are discussing goes beyond voting. We argue for a consensus democracy that engages all members of society. Conducted in the public square, consensus democracy engages citizens in an ongoing discourse of how it will govern itself; it is peace centered, all members have voice. Simple voting can slip into war-centered debate where one wins by destroying an opponent. Consensus democracy is based on

freedoms to, and responsibilities, rather than freedom from and obligations (Fromm, 1994). Members of a society have responsibilities to engage, to participate, in self-government; it cannot be outsourced.

In the democracy of ancient Athens, the term citizen was used to denote a person who had all of the freedom to participate in governance and the responsibility to do so. We have shifted citizenship so that it indicates freedom from x rather than freedom to x. This is a fundamental shift and whereas freedom from is inseparable from responsibilities, the freedom from is accompanied only by obligations. The works of philosophy are filled with examination of the best modes of education to create the citizens desired for any particular type of society. It is only recently that the conversation moved from how to create the best citizens to how to create the best workforce. We have abdicated our political responsibilities to participate in exchange, and are finding that in the absence of the drive to an ideal society, there is a vacuum of values that has been filled with exchange-for-exchange-sake.

Just as education is a process, democracy is a process, and citizenship is a process; it is something that is made, not something that is had. We are not talking about American citizenship; rather, something that transcends space and paperwork. Citizenship is a responsibility to participate in collective *making*, not purely an obligation to perform services and follow rules. Self-governance is the most desired human condition and it does not come about in the absence of education.

The term citizen has been co-opted by nations as a thing that is available to be had or sought after. Rather than indicating a share in the construction of civic space, contemporary ideas of citizenship have shifted to create it as a means of indicating membership for administrative purposes.

Therefore, those using the term to indicate someone involved in the processes of self-governance has required the addition of modifiers. If we have to call it engaged-citizenship then this means it is also possible for there to exist a form of disengaged-citizen. We argue that, that is an impossibility; engagement is built into the definition of citizenship.

Modifiers to the term represent an attempt to correct the mismatch between the term and an idea that needs a vehicle for expression. Citizen as a synonym for member disengages and pacifies that self-governing requirement that criticizes the consolidation of power. We want to disturb the comfort as part of subverting the demolition of individual sovereignty. Language is the location for that battle as it requires no permission and is the only weapon left to the people in the face of a government that operates in service of vested interests (Camus, 1991). Assenting to the definition created as a mechanism of control is to leave intact the idea of citizen as a bureaucratic status and anything other than that as an extraordinary state requiring not its own term but a modification to demonstrate its variance from the norm. We do not need to reform the word by adding adjectives; we need to transform it to what it needs to be - to remake it as a mechanism of expression, not accept it as a means of control. The tool for moving this definition into creation is education.

Disobedience and Transformational Disciplines

The shift from criticism to preparation has created confusion over the role of educational institutions in society. A flood of new vision and mission statements are created by an army of administrative employees lending credence to the idea that there is some confusion about what the

mission and vision of the university might be. The mission of the university is the same as it has always been: to seek truth. However, the accompanying responsibility to speak that truth to power that was developed by radical teachers during the 1970's has shifted. Power, in fact, knows the truth (Chomsky, 2000). We are mistaken if we believe that the status quo exists due to the ignorance of those whom it most benefits. We must be done with speaking to power, we cannot ask it to dismantle its own system. Instead, we advocate a new audience: speak truth to the disenfranchised. Revolutions do not occur from the top down.

A Pedagogy of Disobedience

The principles of civil disobedience teach us that when systems created by human hands act to create more injustice than they prevent, we have an obligation as thinking beings to not only refuse to give aid to the injustice but to actively work to dismantle the unjust systems and create new ones (Zinn, 2003). The atrophy of tenure and the dismantling of the power of unionization has led to a situation in which direct action against academic-capitalism is dangerous. Despite these circumstances, the university maintains a unique place in society as the guardian of truth-seeking and knowledge creation. We need to provide our students with the mechanisms for *disobedient decision-making*. We envision them as radical about engagement, truth-seeking, and meaning-making. This is a more sophisticated approach than the one represented by the cry to 'question authority' but it comes from the same roots.

Youth has a natural affinity for disagreement with any status quo; however, this tendency is tempered by indoctrination. The success of the corporate culture of indoctrination is evident in that it has left those fighting for education (faculty and

teachers) beset by those who should be their strongest allies (students, other faculty, and teachers). The answer does not lie in counter-indoctrination, the charge often levied against anyone who speaks against this corporatization; we do not advocate teaching students to be radicals-for-radicals-sake. The replacement of one indoctrination for another does not address the ethical issue: education should prepare individuals to make their own decisions, not simply enthrall them to the most recent ideology, this "darkness of mind must be dispelled not by the rays of the sun and glittering shafts of day, but by the aspect and law of nature" (Lucretius Carus, 1952, p. 31).

Pattern Disruption

The key to student disobedience is helping them to understand how to recognize the moment of choice in their validation of authority and then to support the process of their own determination. The patterns that people experience become a naturalized part of their reality, the discovery that patterns can be disrupted and the mastery of the techniques to both disrupt and create is the most fundamental context for education. This is what transforms education from something that a student gets (consumption model) to something that a student does (process model).

An inability to recognize and disrupt patterns leads to their gross over application; such is the problem with the slippery slope concept wherein we hear arguments that human beings do not have the ability to recognize that being able to marry someone of the same sex is fundamentally different from being able to marry a donkey. This absurd conclusion is only possible if we deny the human capacity to develop sophisticated perceptions of inappropriate bounding structures (not to mention an absolute lack of any movement in support of

extra-species matrimony). We cannot question the laws of physics, but we can question axioms and the more students learn to understand the difference between the rules of nature and those that are naturalized, the better able they are to make determinations that reject disassembly of democratic processes, no matter their dominance. Our goal in the classroom is to question the nature of intellectual fields (Fogle, 2011) and to challenge the taken for granted.

This does not require large budgets or special equipment; most importantly, it does not require permission. All of the resources necessary for this type of action are under the direct control of the individual teacher. It is not easy, however. Faculty must learn how to be radical teachers and as no external structure can support such activities, the internal one must be sufficient to bear the burden alone.

The difficulty that follows is that it is not sufficient to simply identify and disrupt patterns. Post-modernism led to the focused study of patterns and their disruptions, but has stopped short of the transformative reconstruction necessary. Endless deconstruction is a destructive process and has left many feeling that the only two choices are willful ignorance or succumbing to despair. One of the most painful states of human existence is to know everything and control nothing (Herodotus, 1987) and today, when more information is available than ever before in human history, we are painfully knowledgeable. Awareness of all that is wrong without the concurrent development of structures to help individuals understand how to transform the problems is crushing. We have failed to understand our own abilities and lost our revolutionary fervor in the process – it is one thing to recognize, another entirely to remake.

Students in design disciplines are steeped in the processes of projecting a desired future and working to understand the mechanisms by which such a future might be brought into being. The establishment of the vision for this desired future is what allows for the construction of the framework for decisions that are to be made as the messy problem is worked in relationship to possible responses. Without an idea of the desired future, something that requires the reasoning abilities of philosophy, the processes of creation are meaningless and effectively random. It is not that nothing good has ever come of blind exploration, but rather that when it has occurred it has been only accidental.

Without education as a process for understanding and practicing transformation in day-to-day decision-making, “ordinary men [sic] often cannot reason about the great social structures – rational and irrational – of which their milieu are subordinate parts. Accordingly, they often carry out a series of apparently rational actions without any idea of the ends they serv” (Mills, 2000, p. 167). It is because of this lack of abilities to use projection as a framework for decision-making that seemingly rational and empathetic human beings can engage in acts with horrifying consequences and it is certainly not possible to assume any but the most remote possibilities for the improvement of the human condition and the processes of democracy in such a state.

Conclusions

Design is a way of paying attention; of drawing connections between disparate information. It is an abductive process of investigation in which messy and indeterminate problems are worked in relationship to a wide variety of possible responses without the existence of a

particular correct and discoverable answer. The questions that are asked change in response to the solutions presented in an iterative process that requires abilities to freely move across disciplinary territories. As the problems are so sticky, or as they have been termed 'wicked' (Buchanon, 1992), they cannot be ideally addressed without highly developed pattern recognition and analysis abilities.

So, where do we begin? First by understanding the difference between positive disobedience versus destructive defiance and assisting students to develop their own understandings of disobedience. Often we ask students to think for themselves, or to question authority, and they begin by defying deadlines, questioning the details of assignments, or other such minutia. This indicates a willingness to comply with our requests, but a lack of the necessary structures of thought by which they would be able to address higher-level issues of structure and assumptions. They have not yet developed the abilities to critically evaluate what is before them and so instead grab onto what is easiest for them to envision as challengeable. This is the same distraction that keeps our society arguing over the symptoms of our problems rather than every addressing the underlying issues. Disobedience as an ongoing practice requires a great deal of scaffolding, a highly developed sense of empathy, and the ability to range across knowledge sources to pull together information. As teachers, we can make our own processes visible to students, demonstrate the movement beyond identification to reconstruction, something that requires both confidence and creativity.

We argue the need to recognize the limits of *Bloom's Taxonomy*. Bloom (1956) provides a foundation on which to add design disciplines and liquid knowing (Mendoza & Matyok, 2012). Bloom argues intellectual skills can be characterized as

knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Missing as a dominant intellectual skill in this taxonomy is questioning. Questioning is treated tangentially. For Bloom, questioning occurs within the boundaries of defined knowing that at best is reorganized, but never challenged *a priori*.

This is not the recipe for immediate revolution. Instead, it is a method of contributing to the slow, accretive processes of enacting democracy. It contributes a greater number of actors to the performance, but gives them the ability to create meaning beyond the spectacle. Decisions made in a democracy must include the voices of the individuals to be affected, either directly or through the empathetic representation by others. Having that voice is one component, but if that voice has nothing to express or no method by which to intelligently engage others in expression, it can actually be more dangerous than useful because it gives the appearance of participation that works to legitimize decisions made by vested interests.

An aristocracy of organized money may have usurped our institutions of education, but there is a portion of our classroom that remains completely under our control. As Voltaire noted, 'nothing enfranchises like education' (Durant, 1961, p. 154) and there is nothing else that educates like teachers.

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