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On the Importance of Collaborative Peer Learning as a Collective Learning Experience in Finnish Higher Education Classrooms

Robert FitzSimmons
University of Lapland

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Abstract

This article discusses the need for collaborative learning in higher education as a means to advance a moral democracy in the classroom and in the community as well as the role of the neoliberal state in the commodification of knowledge and how this commodification has related to Finnish higher education. The transformation in Finnish education from the traditional Nordic model to the neoliberal model has stifled debate, deliberation and collaboration in the classroom. University students' (N=150) evaluations that were given to the teacher after teaching thirteen courses in English reading comprehension and English oral skills in 2012-2013 formed the data of this study. The feedback was analyzed through qualitative content analysis by categorizing the answers according to the themes of meaningful learning experiences, abilities of critical thinking, and opinions on collaborative learning. As a conclusion, a direct-action pedagogy to counter the banking concept of education is stressed.



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... if students are to speak to students they must do so where students gather—at school.

Senator Denton, during a discussion of Equal Access Act, 1983

Students live in a historical situation, in a social, political and economic moment. Those things have to be part of what we teach.

Herbert Kohl, Founder of the Open School Movement, 1964

The Background: From Social Democracy to Neo-Liberalism

Margaret Thatcher (1993) stated in her memoirs “There is no such thing as society...there are individual men and individual women and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look after themselves first” (pp. 623-627). Thatcher’s comment speaks to the heart of neoliberalism and neoliberal government policies. For Margaret Thatcher, society is non-existent and basically, we are just independent men and independent women looking out for our own personal needs disconnected from the stranger that walks among us. Neoliberal governments seem to put emphasis on such *invisibility* since these governments accept no responsibility for creating a cooperative welfare state. Rather, such governments see no reason for such a state and consider this kind of state an abnormality to human development. For neoliberals, people are independent entities acting alone within their own perspective families whose main responsibility is for their own family members. Interestingly, since family members are also placed within a neoliberal understanding of dog eat dog existence, these members also become independent and disconnected through understandings of individual successes and failures. As such, life becomes an independent means of individualized choice where we all swim or drown based on our ability to choose our own life currents correctly. In essence, we are living in a very particular form of capitalism (Hill, 2013) and the Finnish people are no exception as they have now navigated away from the Nordic Welfare model and into more streamlined neoliberal model. This transformation has also influenced the Finnish education system in tangible ways at the grassroots level as knowledge is seen as “knowledge of capital or commodity” (Brunila & Edström, 2013, p. 301). The Finnish education model was once firmly implanted in the Nordic Welfare State but during the past twenty-five years, the education system morphed into a more neoliberal system of managerial control with pro-market values (Kiviranta et al., 2003; Rinne, 2000). Moreover, this transformation toward a neoliberal education policy was said to be hidden from the Finnish population through a series of small changes made within the education system by a “hidden education policy” (Kiviranta et al., 2003, p. 184). In addition, Rinne (2000) has also documented a substantial sea change in Finnish education that began in the 1990’s, as policy elites began to implement structural reforms throughout the education system (see Table 1). As Rinne states, from his perspective in the late nineties, this could have “countless unintended consequences, which pop up only after many years” (Rinne, 2000, p. 139).

These consequences can now be seen in the everyday practice of schooling in Finland. Rinne’s (2000) concerns about “The new segregation, increasing competition, diversifying school careers, and the subsequent diversifying life careers” (p. 139) have all entered into Finnish education practice, which in turn has also created immense social changes in Finland, as

the Finnish policy elites have embraced the globalized world to the detriment of the Nordic welfare state. What this has meant for university teaching is a shift away from a pedagogy of cooperativeness and social awareness to a more competitive way of being and thinking. Suoranta has stated that this “blind drive for measurement, evaluation and accountability in academic work” has put the ideas of “solidarity” and “cooperative learning” aside (Suoranta, 2008, p. 711). As Table 1 shows the changes in Finnish education have been dramatic and steep, and such a sea change has not only affected the way educators and teachers teach but also the way the students learn inside an evaluative managed system. Suoranta (2008) uses Fromm’s terminologies of “being mode” and “having mode” to explain the situation, by placing the Finnish university system in the “having mode” of learning: putting knowledge to memory and studying robotically unlike the “being mode” which embraces “real life” (p. 711).

Table 1
Directional Changes in Finnish Education Policy (see Rinne 2000, p. 139)

The Former Finnish Model	The Neoliberal Model of the 1990s
The goal is educational equality and through it social equality	Competition between individuals and schools
Common school system for all	Diversification and stratification of the school system
Highly centralized state control	Growth of regional and school-specific decision-making power (deregulation, decentralization)
Uniform curricula	Differentiated curricula
Expertise seen to rest with teachers and officials	Stronger parental choice
Education is a totally public monopoly	Some degree of private competition
Education totally funded publically	Private funding entering education
Great autonomy for education	Evaluating the profitability of education beginning (the Evaluative State)
Bureaucratic administration	Managerialisation of administration
Targeted pre-planned funding	Slump budget funding

Such a transformation toward neoliberalism (as shown in figure 1) is certainly a dramatic shift away from the West European social democratic model of the past where various welfare states whether Nordic or otherwise were created for a more shared social responsibility. Under such a welfare state government, the emphasis was placed on equality, social justice and cooperativeness among people. Taxation was generally progressive and the state was directly involved in the affairs of the communities. According to Hursh (2009), “Under social democratic liberal policies, social inequality is a social responsibility. Social justice requires that inequalities be minimized through social programs and the redistribution of resources and power” (p. 155). In other words, the state allocated resources and distributive these resources when and where necessary. Moreover, education was publicly funded and not corporate sponsored and communities received the resources that were necessary for a well-functioning learning

environment. In the social democratic model, people contributed to the well-being of all through taxation and through other initiatives that enhanced human development.

Unfortunately, the social democratic model in education that was firmly established during the Nordic welfare state is now disappearing being replaced by a neoliberal world outlook. This neoliberal outlook directly affects people's relationships with each other and also with other species life through changes in "values, social welfare, justice, and equality". (Lappalainen et al., 2013, p. 250). Accordingly, Hursh (2009) states that "Neoliberalism not only changes social structures but also changes the relationship between the individual and society" (p. 155). It is here in the realm of human relations that the neoliberal paradigm can be most destructive because human relations become subordinate to the market and to the mechanisms that this marketization produces: the objectification of human relations. In this, we need to consider Dowbor when he stated in the Preface of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Heart* that "a better life includes access to better things, but it also includes, and fundamentally so, the ensuing human relations" (Dowbor, 1997, p. 27). For Dowbor, the neoliberal outlook produces a hellish context of competitive human beings that battle each other for survival and self-gain (Dowbor, 1997). Moreover, we can certainly see this in the amount of reality television shows that usually contain a winner with many losers after weeks of aggression, diabolical self-planning and scheming. However, what is missing is the other end of the spectrum. On the other end of the spectrum, people could be learning values that show more solidarity, cooperativeness and a general understanding that the public good is served through the betterment of all (see Freire, 1997). However, this is not a part of neoliberal policy of governance nor is it in neoliberal education discourse.

Furthermore, what can be seen now in Finnish education policy is the emphasis on "choice" (Kivirauma et al. 2003; Rinne, 2000), especially in the high school educational curriculum. The current discussion taking place among Finnish education policy makers is the elimination of certain compulsory courses and to give Finnish high school students' the opportunities to choose their courses. The purpose of this change is to place emphasis on individual value, individual choice, and individual freedom so that the high school student can be an independent social actor in deciding her future. Of course, the downside to such a transformation is the loss of community and commonality. By community and commonality, I refer to the social inclusion between people, the bonds that are fostered and formed in families, in communities, and in schools—private and public spaces where common humanity is shared and experienced (see Kilminster, 2013, p. 54). Interestingly, Kiviranta, Rinne, and Seppänen (2003) hinted about this possibility of choice in Finnish education at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Accordingly, they stated that "The emphasis of education politics in the 1990's has been to increase 'free choice' at every level of education" (Kiviranta, Rinne, & Seppänen, 2003, p. 181). They also emphasized that in the later part of the twentieth century the Finnish Ministry of Education was discussing the need for more individuality in study plans and in "individualized schooling" (p. 181).

Neoliberalism in Finnish Higher Education Classrooms

Dowbor (1997) states rather forcibly that neoliberalism "has disjointed communities and created a truly anonymous society, whose members only interact through functional systems and electronic terminals" (p. 27). In the context of education, this can mean more disjointed classrooms as teaching becomes instrumentalist, relying on test results and competitive practices

and not on building a community of students in classroom practice that stress a more cooperative classroom learning environment. In this respect, Suoranta (2008) sees a crisis in higher education because of neoliberal higher education policies. He sees the influence of “corporate capitalism” inside neoliberal education structures that focus on Washington Consensus policies by creating an education system focused on structural efficiency for high economic returns and merit oriented rewards (Suoranta, 2008, p. 710). This is not only seen in Finnish education but in also other areas of the public domain. Thus, Finnish educators and teachers will need to confront such every day learning realities that not just affect their own personal working life as educators but also the life world of their students as learners.

Interestingly, Suoranta and Mosio (2006) see a neoliberal “management of campus life” (para. 26) in Finnish colleges and universities toward “superficial teaching and study methods”. Accordingly, they bring an interesting perspective to higher learning under a neoliberal umbrella when they state that both teacher and student are engaged in a contract of “superficiality”, as if the students were studying something meaningful and the teachers were actually teaching critical engagement with the social commons when in fact, the opposite is now happening in university classrooms. What is lacking, they claim, is the questioning process in the classroom: the why, what, how and where knowledge is discussed and collaborated (Suoranta & Mosio, 2006). Also, educators, teachers and students need to keep a social vision alive in the classroom as a foundation for the knowledge that is being discussed. In this, the role of ideology in public life and how ideology molds our human nature and human values should be a part of the dialogue (see Brantlinger, 2009). For Brantlinger (2009), the current ideology of capitalist schooling creates the importance of “status, as well as resource and opportunity hoarding” but a pedagogy of freedom would create learning environments where the “controversial” is openly “engaged” and not “avoided” (p. 401). Thus, knowledge will need to be organic that would directly come from the roots of real life.

My own perspective on neoliberalism and its influence on education come from teaching in a Finnish university for eighteen years and the impact that a neoliberal education has had on the Finnish university student during these years and how knowledge is now transmitted to the student. It has been acknowledged that neoliberalism has had a tremendous impact on the direction of Finnish education. For example, Brunila and Edström (2013) state that Finnish education policy is currently guided by “competition” and “market-oriented terms” (p. 302). They also state that the Finnish education system is now emphasizing a model where flexibility, self-regulation, and choice play a prime role in a student’s life. Plus, the role of performance is also present as schools compete to be number one in the national rankings. Students also seem to be encouraged to memorize knowledge or as Suoranta and Mosio state there is “a blind dependency on the knowledge produced by others” (Suoranta & Mosio, 2006, para. 23). All of these trends have had an extremely destructive influence on how Finnish students engage in knowledge acquisition and in their classroom performance. As opposed to Dewey, the banking concept of education, as outlined by Freire (1988), seems to be the popular means of knowledge acquisition. During my informal discussions with my students many students have claimed that listening to lectures or reading course assigned books without a lecture class is the usual way university students learn their subject matter. What seems to be basically missing is the collaborative classroom where the students can deliberate with each other and with their lecturer or professor about the knowledge being learned (Suoranta, 2008). From my discussions with students, there seems to be a strong desire on part of the student to not only engage knowledge through a critical lens of seeing the world but also to dissect the knowledge being learned from

their own critical awareness as beings who are rooted in the world. Thus, the essence of Finnish higher education needs to change its focus on learning and to rethink why knowledge is being learned.

The purpose of this paper is to stress the importance of collaborative learning classrooms in higher learning institutions. By collaborative learning, I refer to the ability of students to collectively deliberate and dialogue over ideas and knowledge that they may find in their reading process and through an engagement with the indignity of everyday life (Freire, 1988; Parker, 1997; Suoranta, 2008). The main theme of the paper is direct action involvement by both the educator and the student in the learning process with the understanding that learning is a participatory process by both educator and student. The premise is to create a creative, reflective classroom—a classroom where learning becomes a progressive endeavor for dissecting not just book knowledge but knowledge for participatory citizenship. The premise or goal is to create a creative, reflective classroom—a classroom where learning becomes a progressive endeavor for dissecting not just book knowledge but knowledge for participatory citizenship. The basis of the paper will stress a moral democracy as something to attain.

The first question my paper will attempt to answer is: How do university students perceive their ability to collectively deliberate and engage in critical dialogue in their university studies?

The question will be answered by critically analyzing the idea and realization of collaborative learning through student feedback. The feedback consisted of 150 student evaluations that were given to me after the teaching of thirteen courses during the autumn through spring terms 2012-2013. My courses in academic reading comprehension and academic oral skills consisted of social science and education students whose first language was Finnish or Swedish and the evaluations gave the students the opportunity to comment about the learning experience that they engaged in. My courses were given in the English language at the University of Lapland. The feedback was analyzed through qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000) by categorizing the answers according to the themes of meaningful learning experiences, abilities of critical thinking and opinions on collaborative learning. The students' feedback was numbered consecutively and the numbers in the student data refer to what the students commented in their evaluations. The analysis was a mixture of inductive and deductive analysis (e.g., Silverman, 2005) as the purpose was to emphasize students' perceptions and experiences within the selected themes that this paper will introduce.

In addition to students' perceptions, I will also discuss the importance for the educator to begin to consider a less direct role in the students' learning process and why they need to allow students the opportunity to engage their peers in the knowledge being learned through reflective deliberation and collaboration. Thus, the second question for this study: How does the collaborative learning method appear to the teacher and how is the collaborative method used in the classroom?

This question relates to the teachers' role in the collaborative learning experience and the meaningfulness and purpose of engaging students toward reflective deliberation. The paper will not proceed like a traditional research article. Theory and practice, ideologies and empirical data will be discussed side by side when analyzing the aforementioned themes. The essay will also present crucial points in teaching a reflective classroom complemented with practical insights and students' perceptions. Criticality requires certain research methods that are, for example,

related to participatory ethnography and action research and other participatory methods (e.g., Collins, 2009; Diaz de Rada, 2007; Ecclestone, 1996) and approaches that involve the researcher inside and within the social reality of the research target. Methodological choices and questioning are based on the teacher researchers' understanding of her reality and her opportunity of obtaining information about it. When it comes to the reliability of such an approach, it must be acknowledged that the teacher is a part of the phenomenon studied; thus, critical self-reflection makes a salient part of the analysis (Smyth, 1992). However, students' perceptions are to complement the viewpoint. Simultaneously, both the educator and student strengthen the analysis and the relevance of the results.

Thus, I take Jane Addams (1902) to heart when she stated "it is most difficult to hold to our political democracy and to make it in any sense a social expression and not a mere governmental contrivance, unless we take pains to keep common ground in our human experiences" (p. 221).

Creating Definitions

The importance for Finnish students to come to their own conclusion about the knowledge being learned and the ability for these students to learn from their peers will be discussed in this section. There are basically two premises that this section has for classroom practice. First, students need to keep an open mind about knowledge, especially when it comes to receiving opinions and ideas from their peer group. Second, the idea that learning is an act of inspiration and that knowledge can tap into the inspirational life of the student as she puts knowledge learned in the classroom into everyday practice. In other words, after a process of reading, discussing and collaborating, the student begins to create their own definitions about the knowledge learned. From the research, the students seemed to benefit from a collaborative classroom because it gave them the opportunity to see knowledge differently, collectively and questioningly. Furthermore, the students began to create new definitions to their understanding of how knowledge can relate to their everyday lives. Thus, C.W. Mills writing from his perspective in 1959 stated:

... what we must do is to define the reality of the human condition to make our definitions public; to confront new facts of history making in our time, and their meanings for the problem of political responsibility; to release the human imagination by transcending the mere exhortation of grand principle and opportunist reaction in order to explore all the alternatives now open to the human community. (Mills, 1962, p. 235)

If we put this quotation into our current time frame, it would certainly be applicable for today's Finnish academics and teachers. Finnish academics and teachers have an obligation to give a meaning to our current human condition and to speak out openly about their definitions of current reality. But not only do academics and teachers need to define their social reality, students also need the opportunities to make and create their own definitions and to give meanings to their life-world. This is evident in the student feedback that I received during the 2102-2013 school year. In the student feedback this desire for collaborative learning was expressed as follows:

In the end, I like your courses because they made me connect some thoughts in my mind. I also got new ideas and was happy to realize how well I can survive with my English—Many new thoughts about our society. (Student No. 9)

It was all about real things from another point of view. (Student No. 22)

In the end, I liked your courses because they made me connect some thoughts in my mind. I also got new ideas and was happy to realize how well I can survive with my English. (Student No. 3)

Many new thoughts about our society. (Student No. 31)

And of course, students also need the skills to confront their own social commons with their own political responsibilities when this social commons takes on forms of oppression. However, the ability to connect thoughts and ideas and to see different points of view are important for the student's reflective and questioning learning process.

Human beings are creators and makers of history and the human species forms an integral part of our planet not just with other species but with other human beings who come from diverse cultures. Also, as makers and creators of history, people can influence our ecosystems and socio-economic systems for better or for worse through our daily individual and collective actions and decisions. Knowing this, we have an obligation to bring perceived differences into a more collaborative learning classroom. We should take political responsibility for our actions and inactions but we also need to create learning classrooms where children learn to create good history through their awareness of the earth and of the other in their existence because as Freire (1997) stated, "knowledge has historicity" (p. 31). Furthermore, students need to be cognizant of what exactly is happening in their social commons and what actions are necessary to create a flourishing earth from collective human endeavors and academics and teachers need to have a role to play in allowing students to develop various life realizations that they will discover in their own creative life process. In other words, both students and educators need to be a part of the process of creating necessary definitions for the actual lived reality of the species.

The Importance of Sociological Imagination in the Process of Change

Moreover, Finnish academics and teachers need to tap into the human imagination not just their own imaginative abilities but also the imaginative capabilities of their students so that these students can experience an affirmation of their existence as sentient human beings. With this I mean in practice that I want my students to take responsibility for reading the world dialogically and collaboratively with other human beings through the active use of their imaginative abilities. Interestingly, Wolin (2004) puts it this way: "Imagination is the theorists' means for understanding a world he can never 'know' in an intimate way" (p. 19). We can change some of the wording of this sentence and state that the "imagination" is the (*students*) means for understanding a world (*they*) can never "know" in an intimate way". The idea that the imagination can be used to connect our students to the *stranger* in their existence not just in an indirect way but in a more intimate way should be a prime mover in an educator's and teacher's lessons. Our students need to affirm the collective part of their humanity by seeing into the lives of other human beings and other species. This in turn will bring them into a self-realization of the power of their own imagination for the moral good. For example, students commented that:

This course was different than other courses here (at the university). We really had a chance to discuss about the things. A lot of information and topics to think about. (Student No.39)

Reading materials helped open my eyes and horizons to Finnish society and social problems. (Student No. 46)

Accordingly, Mills (1962) states:

It is the affirmation of one's self as a moral and intellectual center of responsible decision; the act of a free man who rejects "fate", for it reveals his resolution to take his own fate, at least, into his own hand. (p. 235)

What Mills implies is that human beings need to take back their destiny and gain control of their life experience. This life experience should not be left up to the decision making of the elite as they mold their own vision for us to live. Rather, we need take back control over our collective destiny and make the decisions necessary for a well-balance social existence. Through the powerful impetus of the sociological imagination, students can unleash huge potential to get at the roots of social existence. In this respect, Giddens states that by using the sociological imagination, students can see outside their own individual concerns by connecting an individual concern to a much larger issue (Giddens, 2009). Thus, our students do need their imagination today. They need to be able to create different definitions about what they wish for the social commons. These definitions can be much different from the current "market" definition that seems to define our social practice. Part of this can be focused on seeing alternatives to neoliberal hegemony through a collaborative motivated classroom that allows students to take back control of the learning environment and to use their imagination creatively and reflectively. In classroom practice, students need to use their imaginative skills to have empathy for people who are living in oppressive conditions. Also, students need imaginative ability to see the world as something connected to the greater whole in their community and to understand the concept of "actual freedom". As one students wrote:

I'm grateful to be enrolled in this course...to think freely, to talk free, and to challenge free are the most valuable thing I learned from this course. (Student No. 57)

According to my experience after an eighteen-year-long career as a teacher of academic reading, writing and oral skills in Finnish higher education, there seems to be a lack of imaginative use. What does seem clear is that there can be a clear disconnect in the classroom between teacher and student in how knowledge is presented, if this knowledge is given in such a way where the imagination is curtailed and where curiosity is dulled. My study showed that the students seem to have a strong desire to critically engage their social commons in very tangible ways.

Creating Meaningful Classroom Dialogue

Indeed, this notion of taking control of our own fate does not simply imply a rugged individualist approach to life as may be found in a market-centered democracy. As noted, I refer to a collective fate—a willingness to connect with the other in dialogue and deliberation in order to dig at the current definitions that define our own collective social reality so that we can confront issues of oppression through "a politics of truth" (see Mills, 1962, pp. 234-235). I

contend that various definitions of truth need to be dissected in the classroom and also within the greater society. Students need to create their own definitions of truth with an understanding that they do not need to accept the truths of an elite who seem to care for nothing more than to make our life-world safe for corporate robbery and for corporate profits under the umbrella of the free market. As two student stated in their evaluations:

Awareness raising. I was really happy that many (students) learnt to think critically. (Student No. 64)

Critical thinking and bringing new things to our awareness (Student No. 9)

Nor do students need to accept the way knowledge is taught and conveyed in the classroom. For example, social worker students stated in their evaluations in regards to collaborative peer learning:

I learned new things about our society, for example, about things that I have not been interested in. It was nice to learn more. (Student No. 71)

Thank you for the new thoughts! (Student No. 86)

I appreciate this course because not only did it give me confidence to speak English but also it gave me knowledge of our society. The course also gave me hope that maybe I can do something to change the course that the society is on. Thank you and keep up the good work and educating students with your unique way of teaching! (Student No. 98)

I really liked the course even if it sometimes felt bad to hear so many bad news. I feel like I got a new perspective on things happening around me now. I am more aware about things. (Student No. 102)

Mills (1962) asked a very important question. He asked: “Why must they study the trivial subjects they do, rather than confront the insistent and significant problems of our time?” (p. 234) This question now has relevance for today and we, as academics and teachers, can now ask the same question that Mills did decades ago. Mills was critiquing the scholars of his time when he stated the above statement, mainly because he saw these academics remaining silent in the face of nuclear armageddon. But we can also ask this question now as we confront our own armageddons emanating from the various free market capitalisms that influence our own educational fabric as corporate vocabulary enters the educational discourse with very little awareness of what this means for our students. Why are so many academics allowing such neoliberal vocabulary to infiltrate the way our students learn and what subjects they study? For example, three students commented about how wonderful it was to have their minds awakened through a process of questioning and discovery:

I really like discussing and different opinions. Politics is important in Social Work and health care. First, I thought there is too much politics but it was really finally a good thing. (Student No. 129)

I have enjoyed all your classes. Keep up doing your method as a teacher to wake up social work students from their narrow perspectives. It is refreshing when somebody dares to throw some radical societal issues up (for discussion). (Student No. 133)

Thanks! Don't lose your hope and idealism! We are really thinking a little behind our cynicism. You are doing great work by provoking us! (Student No. 142)

However, the influence of neoliberal thinking in universities is not just a Finnish experience because as Natham (2005) observed, university life is no longer a place for discussing the “philosophical and political issues of the day” and students are not at all interested in “learning or discovery” (Natham, 2005, p. 100). She based her claim on her own experience as a professor-turned-student and the lack of critical learning and discovery that she was engaged in as a student in an American university. My own experience as a university lecturer in Finland is that students in general are not engaged in critical awareness of the world around them nor are they engaged in having a critical dialogue in the classroom that would create inspirational solutions to everyday oppressions. I base my conclusions on the data that I have gathered from my own classes as demonstrated by students' comments mentioned in this article. For example, this comment by a student was rather common in my evaluations:

Teacher was inspiring and made me think things I never think before. (Student No. 147)

Interestingly, my reading comprehension and oral skills classes focused on group discussion about the ideas found inside their reading texts and I was basically a facilitator in the lessons by offering a Socratic method for the issues being discussed. The purpose of both courses was to activate the students' language capabilities by offering students the opportunity to see their society through a critical lens so that they can be creators of their own collective history. I also think that if we desire our students to be creators of their own collective history, academics and teachers also need to be engaged in such history creation. Friere (1997) stated that “In being conscious that I can know socially and historically, I also know that what I know cannot be divorced from the historical continuity” (p. 31). People in the teaching and learning professions have a responsibility to be politically and socially engaged not only in the classroom but also with their surrounding communities in how public decisions are made and for what purpose these decisions are implemented into the social commons. There should not be a withdrawal from the public but rather just the opposite: we need an active engagement in decision making about how people are governed by the political class that has power, especially when it comes to educating our students. As noted by Suoranta (2008), students are becoming more integrated into capitalist society and they have become reflections of their professors and teachers. He continues his criticism by stating that students are now “highly cynical, indifferent, individualistic and shallow attitudes of their institutions, and the capitalist world in general” (Suoranta, 2008, p. 713). If this view is correct, we all need to be concerned with the direction of higher education because a vibrant political participatory democracy needs critical, self-aware citizens who are deeply rooted in community practice. Finally, Weil (1978) states that

A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of the community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future...It is necessary for him to draw well nigh the whole of his moral, intellectual and spiritual life by way of the environment of which he forms a natural part. (p. 41)

One place where rootedness can take place is in the classroom through the rediscovering of the students' humanity for other human beings. I believe that students have a natural tendency to desire to feel a part of their surrounding community. As such, the classroom is a small

microcosm of community life: it forms a community within a community and it provides a starting point for active social engagement with the social commons. Also, as Friere and Faundez (1989) assert, this active social engagement requires that teachers and students be engaged in the pedagogy of asking questions because “knowledge begins with asking questions” (pp. 34-35).

Exporting the Impoverished Mind

From my own experiences as a university lecturer who works in a Finnish university, I have seen the benefits of collaborative learning experiences among university students. When students are given the opportunity to speak in small groups with their peers about meaningful issues not only in their own society but also issues affecting the globe, the students are actively engaging in deliberation and in collaborative learning. Furthermore, the students are connected to their organic world as they question and exchange viewpoints, opinions, facts, and knowledge with their peers and with their teachers. However, this form of learning will need to also take place in the lower grades, if we expect Finnish university students to have such life affirming skills.

Mills (1962) writes about the “impoverished mind” and “the lack of political will” (p. 231) that impregnated American society in the 1950’s. And yet, from my own perspective as an academic who works in a Finnish university, I can see the same impoverishment and lack of political will in Finnish society as successive governments have eroded the Welfare State and have encouraged the “marketization” of Finnish education. For example, Raija Vahasalo, President for the Committee of Education and Culture and a Conservative member of parliament linked Finnish education to an export commodity that could give Finland economic visibility (Vahasalo, 2013). Accordingly, she writes: “Now we are facing a challenge: how can we combine education export and economic rationales with the inherent values and educational principles of a knowledge society” (Vahasalo, 2013). Education as it is being designed and fashioned in Finland seems to lack the human element since many Finnish children lose interest in schooling by the fourth grade. Yet, Finnish education policy is based on good PISA results in certain subject matter and the Finnish education elite looks to these results as an export product to be bought and sold in the marketplace. Suoranta (2008, p. 710) sees a crisis in higher education because “knowledge as a commodity” has become a fact of life and yet, we can also see this market “export product” in the Finnish intermediate school as teaching for the test is becoming more fashionable within the neoliberal model of education that Finland has adopted. Accordingly, the final outcome for this export product is good international test scores and not students with excellent critical engagement skills—skills that can be used by students so that they can become good moral citizens with the empathy skills necessary for a loving and caring human life.

Thus, a Finnish exportable product would be an education system that centers itself on genuine human values and concerns—a system that puts humanity before the dictates of the market. In this, we need to replace the market democracy that is currently being supported and practiced by various elites. The education system which we need to advocate would be one where a moral democracy can take shape in the social commons. Such a moral democracy would bring opportunities in the classroom for a participatory politics as students realize their human potential. Furthermore, since education can be tied to the policies of the elite it becomes important that students directly engage with real issues that directly affect the students’ lives as they navigate through their social reality. Moreover, we need to center education practice to

further advance the notion of a “moral democracy”. This moral democracy has at its center the idea that democracy “is a moral ideal” which “requires...opportunities for direct participation of all citizens” (Carr & Hartnett, 1996, p. 70). Giroux (2007) states that

the greatest challenge facing higher education centers on the collective task of developing a politics that extends beyond nation-state and reclaiming the academy as a democratic public sphere willing to confront the myriad global problems that produce needless human suffering ... (p. 203)

In this we need to turn to Jane Addams (1902), a social feminist, who desired a bringing together of humanity through the fellowship of one another and through sympathetic understanding about what we are as human beings. What was important for Addams was the daily experiences of human life found in everyday routines and for people to connect informally in social dialogue (see also Sennett, 2012).

However, both Carr and Hartnett state that people residing in western democracies do not have the skills needed to effectively engage in such a process because of learned passive collective behavior (Carr & Hartnett, 1996). Thus, there seems to be a connection between the values found in a market democracy and the passive human spirit. Interestingly, Addams (1902) writing from the perspective of the turn of the twentieth century wrote that “Social morality results perforce in the temper if not the practice of the democratic spirit, for it implies that diversified human experience and resultant sympathy which are the foundation and guarantee of Democracy” (p. 7).

Through a more clearly defined Moral Democracy, students can engage in definitions of social ethics and “by mixing on the thronged and common road where all must turn out for one another, and at least see the size of one another’s burdens” (Addams, 1902, p. 6). Thus, educators and teachers cannot separate themselves from the politics of the nation nor from its lack of social ethics. Mills (1962) makes this clear when he writes: “Regardless of the motive, to attempt withdrawal is to become subservient to existing authorities and to allow other men to determine the meaning of one’s work” (p. 231). Mills makes a good point about not withdrawing from the political process especially when this process is based on creating subservient and efficient human beings for the competitive marketplace. The notion that education can be an exportable product because of good test scores, at the expense of a student’s wellbeing, to enhance the Finnish competitive brand seems to lack the human element where love and emotional wellbeing are center stage—an element that educators and teachers need to embrace and put forward through active public engagement with society. Again I refer to Mills when he suggests that intellectuals need to take back control of the education process and not rely on others to realize human centered goals and values. He states that now is the moment “to realize them ourselves—in our own lives, in our own direct action, in the immediate context of our own work” (Mills, 1962, p. 232).

Pedagogy for Direct Action

We now need to ask a question: what should this direct action entail? Direct action is often associated with confrontation that includes some sort of violence. However, I refer to a different form of direct action. We just don’t need students who embrace knowledge and who are impassioned by their ideas but we also need students who embrace the opportunities to love their fellow human beings and other species under the umbrella of ideas that stress humanity and

genuine human values that furthers our humanity. Thus, pedagogy for direct action is a critical pedagogy of love—a pedagogy where the student embraces a “project of humanization” (see McLaren, 2005). Educators and teachers need to form ways and means to put these goals into active classroom practice so that students can disengage from a “knowledge as commodity” concept and begin to see knowledge as an organic part of their life process. Suoranta (2008) attempted to answer my question by putting his own emphasis on a collaborative learning environment. He also claimed that the teaching methods used by professors in the university may be blamed for students’ “superficial attitudes” toward learning (Suoranta, 2008, p. 713). Suoranta (2008, p. 714) sees a basic emphasis on the “banking concept of education” in the university, a Frierean concept that understands teaching to be a subject/object relationship where the professor teaches and the students bank the knowledge they are taught. In this concept of education, the student is no more than an object, a vessel to put knowledge into. The banking concept can foster a malaise in students because knowledge is not seen as active but passive. Students learn so that they can pass the exam or to write a paper but not to verbally exchange ideas or opinions with their peers about the knowledge learned and how this knowledge can improve the life of the planet and our own societies.

For Suoranta (2008), one way for students to use direct action to their benefit would be a collaborative classroom where students face each other to discuss relevant issues that can affect their own daily lives and the lives of other human beings and other species. The point behind such a classroom would be to make learning more student-centered through active engagement with what they are learning in class and also with their prior knowledge from their own various life experiences. Suoranta (2008) defines collaborative learning as a student-centered learning experience where students face one another in small peer group deliberation so that students can learn from each other by exchanging knowledge. The end goal of such a classroom is “sympathetic understanding”. A sympathetic understanding has been defined as helping “one make sense of the experiences of others and thus facilitates meaningful communication and social change” (Shields, 2006, p. 431). Accordingly Suoranta (2008) states that

By using collaboration, students are introduced to methods of learning, problem-solving and task efficiency that they can later employ in the workplace. Furthermore, in the context of public sociology, collaborative learning is an argument against capitalist higher education that trains students to obey. (p. 714)

Suoranta sees collaborative learning as beneficial for the students working life but I also see great benefits from collaborative learning for the students’ engagement in public life. Students, when they graduate from school, should strive to engage the public aspects of life through critical engagement and evaluation. It is important that students achieve a critical enlightenment of their social world by digging at the grassroots of societal problems and with issues that may create oppressive outcomes. This can be accomplished through critical dialogue with public figures and with a critical dialogue with their peers for critical citizenship. The point is to create a critical citizenship that directly challenges the way decisions are made and for what purposes these decisions are made. Students become ‘beings in the world’ and not just of the world. Freire (1997) stated that “It would be unthinkable to have a world where the human experience took place outside of a continuity, that is, outside of history” (p. 82).

When we consider a direct-action pedagogy that would put “togetherness” or tolerance at the center of learning, we will then be able to have organic individuals that are connected not just to the world but to the organic whole of species life. The pedagogy becomes a holistic

enterprise as students see the world not as a fragmented entity but as a global community where through a collective understanding of the other, they can put the life process forward as a “value worth preserving” (Giroux, 2006, p. 17). Like Carr and Hartnett (1996), I see a need for a general education that places emphasis on furthering the active, critical and reflective social participation of human beings through a learning interaction that puts stress on a critical interpretation of knowledge so students can be acquainted with what is necessary for a participatory oriented social life where active participation leads to not just a shared experience but also to an understanding of equality between people. Through this interaction with others students, students will be able to iron out their own more personal interpretations of social reality and see themselves as *social beings* in the process of change. I refer to Berger and Zijderveld (2010) when they wrote: “...rooted in a very basic fact about human beings—namely, that they’re *social beings*, whose beliefs and values, whose very *identities*, are produced and maintained in interaction with others” (p. 31).

From my perspective as a university lecturer such comments as stated above by the students are reasons why students are in the university: they are in school to think, to reflect, and to react to the information that they are receiving. Hence, education is a vehicle to utilize the sociological imagination that was previously mentioned, a way and a means for students to step outside themselves to see the world differently and by doing so, they see perspectives that they have never seen before (see Giddens, 2009, p. 6). Furthermore, students can also engage in the process of social change through their collaborative dialogue. Suoranta (2008) states that there is an important issue at play with collaborative learning. He states that the teaching of knowledge can be “a vehicle for social change, whether a tool in the hands of restless critical spirits, or for those who want to be part of a ‘long revolution’, a step by step model for social change” (p. 718). Finally, as Addams (1902) implied, it is through putting the human being into our active reading life that we can find solidarity with humanity because it is through learning that we can begin to use our imagination to experience the oppressive situations of our everyday lives.

In conclusion, collaborative learning in the classroom is one way in which students can benefit in recognizing their own humanity: they are experiencing their humanity through a social interaction and social participation in the classroom as they share knowledge and ideas with other learners. Neoliberalism, as an ideology, needs to be demystified if we expect our students to become critical human beings, able to confront the current message of globalization that nothing can be changed (see Cole, 2005, p. 103). Unfortunately, what Rinne outlined in his neoliberal model for Finnish education in the 1990’s is now coming into maturity during the twenty-first century. Within Finnish higher education, there will need to be less stress on knowledge production as an economic benefit and more emphasis on knowledge as human sentiment. When knowledge is presented in humanly form, it can take on a human character that transcends the neoliberal paradigm and puts learning where it belongs: with the human being.

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Author

Robert FitzSimmons is an English teacher at the University of Lapland and holds a PhD in Education.

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