

Thoughts on a Pedagogy of the Heart for Higher Education Institutions

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Beginnings

I am writing this essay, because my career as a university lecturer is coming to an end as my retirement looms on the horizon. What I find amazing about it all is that the students that I had at the beginning of my career are now in their late 40s, and these former students have now experienced various life experiences and situations. Of course, this is the progression of time and something quite natural. I am now in my late 60s and all of this has given me moments for reflection. The movement of time can create a conundrum of emotions and experiences.

I began my work at the University of Lapland during the spring of 1996. At that time Finland was still feeling the aftershocks of the depression of the early 1990s. My focus was on my students and their lifeworld. I knew that when the economic depression started they were teenagers. I tried to have empathy, because I knew that their parents may have been in dire straits during the economic decline. I remembered that many families suffered from unemployment and loss of income. I also knew that the students may have witnessed bankruptcy or loss of property both inside their own families and in other families during the debt crisis. The 1990s were a difficult time for many people in Finland, and the depression crisis is still a dark cloud in many people's lives.

The students of 1996 were also 1980s children. They were raised during the Nordic welfare model. It was during the 1980s that the Nordic welfare state was reaching full bloom in Finland. The education that the students experienced was focused on collective identity, social cohesion, and social equality (Kivirauma et al., 2003), and I believe that the students at the university had their own understanding that the Nordic Welfare State would return after the crisis and depression of the early 1990s were over. I still sensed that they were optimistic about the future because of what the students said during my classes at the time. I also saw no anxiety about the future, and more importantly, there was a feeling that when the crisis was over, there would be a return to the Nordic model because politicians would make promises that budget cuts were made to save the welfare state instead of destroying it. I also remember that students were not pressured to graduate at a certain time; the diploma mill had not yet been established and university still seemed a place for reflection and knowledge engagement instead of an institution for governmental social control through benefit cost analysis.

I think that we may need to ask two questions: Will students be entering a society where people are cared for regardless of circumstance or will it be a society of self-interest and individ-

ualism where profit rules over people and planet? And lastly, we can ask a third question: Will students be able to connect to a collective identity that offers wellness and security and not an individualist identity that offers insecurity and unwellness? My hope would be a resounding yes to the first question and a resounding no to the second question, and a profound hope for a more collective identity grounded in wellness and collective security. However, I believe that the neoliberal model would perhaps need to be challenged and replaced by a more human centered pedagogy of the heart to achieve such goals.

Neoliberalism and Finnish Education

The 1990s saw the beginning of an ideological shift to a neoliberal free market system where the social democratic model was being replaced by a neoliberal model of governance (Browning, 2007). This was also seen in the governance of education (Kivirauma et al., 2003; Rinne, 2000). In the area of education, the change of ideology was not only immense but also problematic, since it allowed inequality to enter the education system when strands of Thatcherism entered the education arena (Kivirauma et al., 2003). It needs to be mentioned that this ideological sea change was made by the Finnish political elite after the fall of the Soviet Union when Esko Aho, the then prime minister, declared the Nordic model dead (Browning, 2007) and the comprehensive reform process of the welfare state began. Further, there was a conscious decision to abandon the Nordic third way between communism and capitalism, since the fall of communism no longer made the Nordic model viable for the political elite (Browning, 2007).

What I found interesting was the effect of the neoliberal model on generations of students who would experience it in their learning environments and in the way in which they would cope with more competitive and individualistic learning situations (Zeira, 2022). Moreover, I would often have conversations with students both inside and outside the classroom to get their perspectives and understandings. I discovered that students in Finland were faced with enormous pressure to succeed in competitive learning environments and the toll that this brought can be seen in the mental health issues that students may experience because of the neoliberal transformation of society and in neoliberal educational goals (Desierto & de Maio 2020,155; Roberts, 2021). I agree with Daniel Saunders (2007) that we need to engage more with neoliberalism and its impact on higher education, through the lives of students who are engaged with it.

What I found interesting was the impact that neoliberalism may have on a student's mental health. The Finnish news service Yle has often reported on the mental health situation of students over the span of several years (Yle, 2008; Yle, 2018; Yle, 2019; Yle, 2021a; Yle, 2021b; Yle, 2022) but root cause solutions to the problem always seemed to be lacking. Finally, my students often spoke in the classroom with me about mental health issues so that they could express their own concerns about mental health during their university years. For many years I have made mental health research in Finland a topic for discussion in my classes.

The conclusion that I made was that it was the neoliberal system of education that was sick, causing undue suffering on students' mental health and not the fault of individual choice. This

was also the conclusion of Michael Priestly when he compared neoliberal education practice to “sadistic sickness”, stating that the neoliberal elite “(re)produces the cycle of sickness for its own politico-economic gratification” (Priestly 2019,186). He also states that he does not want to imply a causal relationship between mental health and neoliberalism. However, I do believe that there is an indirect relationship between neoliberal ideology that permeates society and the rampant symptoms of mental illness that exists among students throughout the education system.

As Suoranta (2022) argues we seem to be living in a harsh environment of new conditions, and to make sense of it all would be daunting. Roy (2004) stated years ago that many individuals seem to be living in a reality without security or meaning, waiting for their sanity to come back. And yet, practically nothing has changed from when Roy made such a claim. Students are still faced with daunting challenges during their school and university life that imposes undo pressure on them to perform well, get good results, and to graduate as quickly as possible amidst all the chaos. The mental stress of school life can be seen in the latest wellbeing barometer among Finnish high school students where 62% said that finding a study/life balance was difficult (YLE, 2022). The question remains however, just what kind of challenges are students facing in their higher learning environments and how is this reflected in real life outside of schooling and learning situations?

Time for a Rethink?

As my working life progressed at the university, I came to believe that there needs to be a rethink about the direction of Finnish education, and I began to consider alternatives to the neoliberal model of education that crept into the Finnish education system in the 1990s (Kivirauma et al., 2003). One alternative that I considered was a Freirean pedagogy of the heart through the lenses of critical pedagogy (FitzSimmons, 2015).

Freire’s perspective on a pedagogy of the heart can offer an alternative to the encroachment of neoliberalism into institutions of higher education, because it challenges the very nature of the neoliberal agenda of turning students into consumers of knowledge (Desierto & de Maio, 2020) rather than the engagers of knowledge (FitzSimmons, 2015).

A Pedagogy of the Heart

There seems to be a drift toward individual responsibility where people are encouraged to be more responsible for their own life outcomes. This is also true for students. For example, it is not uncommon for my students to tell of the stress in having to make serious career choices at the beginning of high school. Unfortunately, the notion of collective good is being replaced by self-reliance, individual well-being, and entrepreneurship. The stress is now on individual choice where a pedagogy of individualism is paramount at the expense of a more human centered pedagogy of the heart. A pedagogy of the heart refers to “the ability of students to actively engage their lifeworld with concern and commitment” (FitzSimmons, 2015, 211). It also brings the

notions of solidarity, justice, and fraternity to the center of the education environment (Desierto & de Maio, 2020,155; FitzSimmons, 2015).

In the past, education was focused on social justice and social equality (Rinne, 2000), but it now sees itself as a promoter of free market liberalism even in the midst of economic crises and social instability created by the social and economic system that it promotes. In contrast, a pedagogy of the heart would create a curriculum that nurtures the heart and soul of the student and a more gentle and caring community in which to grow, develop and prosper (FitzSimmons, 2015).

The pedagogy of the heart (see FitzSimmons, 2015) would put the ideology of neoliberalism at its center of discourse because the very nature of neoliberalism is the antithesis to the very foundation of the pedagogy of the heart. Freire made this very clear when he stated that capitalism was by its very nature perverse and against solidarity (Freire, 1997, 88). He also elaborated on the unfair socio-economic relationships that can be seen inside the system—a system that can create great wealth and yet, create such hunger and poverty in the human race (Freire, 1997, 88). Thus, students inside a pedagogy of the heart will need to be looked upon as ‘social investments’ and not ‘capital investments’ so that they can live healthy social lives and not as specimens for re-marketization (see Ridge, 2012, 388–389) for the workplace.

Commodification and De-Commodification

My point is simple: Students will need to be given a de-commodified existence and not an existence of commodification (market dependent) in working life as well as a de-commodified life in learning institutions. I believe that the more we can create learning situations where a student’s existence is not dependent on market values, the better opportunities they will have to lead a more creative and organic life based less on market dependence (see Esping-Andersen, 1990, 21-22; Esposito & Perez, 2014).

I also believe that a pedagogy of the heart should also put stress on the ability to have empathy (the ability to put oneself into the shoes of other people) with the state of humankind (Krznicar, 2014) and also with other species that inhabit the planet. In this, education needs to have an organic foundation that is connected to the everyday aspects of human life and not just the work-related aspects of human life. Students will also need to have a critical voice (FitzSimmons 2015, 18; Suoranta, 2008) where actual freedom can be practiced in the classroom and not be adaptive and silent with the knowledge that they are learning for good, positive human empathy to occur. For instance, there would need to be a discussion of what it means to have a dignified life. Furthermore, students should be seen as an integral part of our common humanity when they enter various learning situations. Finally, a lecturer’s ability to also put themselves into the student’s shoes is very important in fostering a pedagogy that has the heart at its center. There needs to be a mutual understanding of human experience between teacher and student.

Instead of engaging in a non-reflective and in a non-critical learning process with a consciousness that is still and stagnant in the service of neoliberal ideology, we need to develop a post virus, post war consciousness that is full of political, economic, and social liberation by embrac-

ing a fervent critical revolutionary project (see FitzSimmons & Suoranta, 2020) that is rooted in an active and engaged population where people can create a “truly revolutionary project” (Freire, 1985, 82) of the heart. According to Freire, a “truly revolutionary project ... to which the utopian dimension is natural, is a process in which people assume the role of subject in the precarious adventure of transforming and recreating the world” (Freire, 1985, 82). Language and action are two factors enabling students to take on not only the economic struggle that they will face but also the political struggle by verbally and directly challenging the business and political elite when necessary on a political level, especially if they feel oppressed by the decisions that dictate how they should live their lives (Freire, 1988). A pedagogy of the heart can build the foundation for challenging a neoliberal market-centered schooling policy.

Conclusion

During my working life in higher education, I have seen much change in the learning environment and in the administrative structure. It has been a learning experience for me. My twenty-seven years at the university have been the best of times, and the worst of times. But through it all, I have tried to keep my students as the subject of the classroom and not treat them as objects or human commodities. I have tried to treat them with empathy and human understanding, knowing that they too are having their own experiences and observations while navigating their lifeworld.

Most of all, I have seen the effects of crises initiated by government policies over the last three decades and witnessed the transformation that neoliberalism has brought into our value system, where individualism has overshadowed the values of collectivism, equality, and social justice. However, as a lecturer, I still remain hopeful and see a bright future where a pedagogy of the heart will take root and prosper, enriching our students with hope instead of despair, with humanization instead of dehumanization, with purpose instead of alienation from humankind and finally, with empathy for other species that inhabit the planet.

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