

**In the Age of Stupid: A call for Popular Education and
Critical Pedagogy both Inside and Outside the University
. Alice Cutler 14.3.2009**

“It is a farce to affirm that men [sic] are people and thus should be free, yet do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality.” (Freire, 1972: 26)

As I write, the première of ‘The Age of Stupid’ is just about to take place. This is a film showing in mainstream cinemas that is asking why, in the light of the evidence, we are not taking more action on climate change. How does this question relate to our ‘highest’ establishments of education, the universities? Whilst there are increasing amounts of student led political action (e.g. RBS actions co-ordinated by People and Planet, Gaza solidarity occupations and various autonomous student groups), these remain a marginal extra-curricular activity and the student population as a whole has not got the collective power that it used to have, or it now has in other places such as Greece or Italy or France. This is not, I imagine, because students and staff are not aware of the need for change. In the early years of the twenty-first century it is surely impossible to study the world and *not* be aware of the great problems that we face. From stark global inequality and poverty, to the war on terror and climate change, global issues are of increasing prominence and within the university disparate disciplines must all interface with the same big issues. However, over the past 30 years and with growing momentum, the UK government agenda for higher education has been an increasing drive for skills for ‘employability’ and students are increasingly seen as consumers, preparing to sell their labour on the market. Research agendas and curricula are increasingly determined by the needs of the economy and critical voices and thinking are squeezed out as the university is restructured by and succumbs to the over-arching neo-liberal agenda. So where does this leave the university as a space for critical thinking and action that can challenge the dominant logic of society that is heading towards the brink?

Whilst there is clearly some excellent research and teaching within universities that are well attuned to the scale of the social, environmental and economic crises we face and are doing very important work in a range of disciplines¹, I argue that universities are predominantly concerned with producing a string of qualified individuals who are prepared to participate in an economic model that is increasingly irrelevant and is certainly unsustainable. During the past thirty years, ever higher numbers of graduates have been buying into the myth that a degree leads us to a good job, allowing consumer choice, ever higher standards of living, and being part of the endless economic growth miracle, which is fuelled abundant cheap energy. It seems that this bubble has now burst. Many who had been arguing for decades that this model was inherently contradictory on a finite planet and only benefited a small proportion of the world's population, would say that it was long overdue. So where does this leave the

¹There are many initiatives that are aiming to make the research and outcomes of the university experience more relevant to the social crises we face, such as the programmes in Activism and Social Change, (see Chatterton’s work below) and networks of critical pedagogues, One such network is the Critical Pedagogy-Popular Education Special Interest Group of C-SAP, on the C-SAP website, <http://www.c-sap.bham.ac.uk/>.

present neo-liberal model of higher education, and what are degrees preparing students for exactly? In the current context of global recession and urgent need for a more just and sustainable system, I argue that the university could reassert its critical role in society by fostering a participatory, popular education that empowers them to both understand and be prepared to try and change the structures of the world they live in. Whilst I recognise the important distinction between academic understanding and political action, I argue that in the current context all educational endeavours should have at least some element of practical purpose. I also believe that the pedagogical approach that is taken when teaching about global issues plays an important part in determining the outcomes. Listening to a catalogue of doom and disaster and yet doing nothing about it, can easily lead to dis-empowerment, apathy and depression. Combining participatory methods with concrete planning for action could develop the urgently needed critical thinkers who are prepared to engage with the world and all its challenges. I will describe some of the key features of popular education and where it has been used with the hope that lecturers may experiment with this sort of approach.

Trapeze and the popular education model.

Outside of the university, there are many educational projects that are using a popular education methodology. One, which I am involved with, is Trapeze, a small collective that was set up in 2004 in the run up to the G8 summit in Scotland. Our aim was to bring groups of people together to understand the global economy and to discuss the big issues of climate change and poverty and debt that many people in many different countries face. Throughout 2004 - 2005 Trapeze facilitated educational events with over 100 different groups — community groups, student unions, groups, refugee and migrant organisations and many public meetings. Our methods aim to build collective knowledge and understanding of the issues using time-lines, short films, jargon busting, role plays, quizzes and also providing information about the political context and mobilisations². Thanks to the hook of the G8 summit and, over time, a reputation for workshops that were both stimulating and fun, the levels of engagement and interest in these workshops was overwhelmingly positive. Since then we have continued to promote and facilitate popular education in a wide range of projects and settings. We use a dialogue-based approach which rejects telling people what the problems are what the solutions should be and instead uses participatory activities that allow people to explore their existing knowledges and responses. This is based on our belief in society organising collectively through the practice of self-management, mutual aid and direct democracy. We argue that meeting contemporary social and environmental challenges will require a broad level of participation rather than a few experts or activists and that popular education is an important step towards achieving this aim.

Trapeze is also involved with trying to bridge the traditional academic/activist divide, attending various academic conferences and running seminars on participatory methods and popular education with lecturers inside the university. We have also given lectures within the university, for example at the University of Leeds to 60 second year Geography students just before the G8 summit. Despite the tiered seating we tried to weave in participatory methods, for example, inviting students up on to the

² Trapeze Collective (2007) *Do It Yourself, A Handbook for Changing Our World*, London: Pluto Press.

stage, getting them to stand up or sit down if they agreed with things, working in small groups to discuss questions, translating the G8 communiqués into everyday language and for their homework they were asked to analyse the different demands of the various G8 critical mobilisations. In short they were asked to participate directly in debates of global significance. The students enjoyed the session and produced good assignments. But more importantly they had an opportunity to develop their analytical skills, meet 'real live political activists' and understand the significance of the summit and the counter mobilisations. This in the light of the aims of the course to understand political processes and social movements was invaluable and hopefully inspired at least some of the to get involved in some way.

Quite apart from the moral imperative of developing the university as a critical site of engagement with the big issues of our time, participatory methods are student focussed, build confidence and, most importantly can be fun, and so keep students engaged. Another key principle of popular education is that of breaking down the divide between teacher and learner. This should also be of benefit to overworked lecturers, to foster the idea that students can take responsibility for their own learning. Although not necessarily most efficient in capitalist terms, for a positive and liberatory education it is important to reject what Freire called the banking model or 'mug and jug' approach to education, where the student is an empty vessel to filled with knowledge by the teacher. Instead the teacher questions and encourages critical thinking whilst challenging hierarchies and the status-quo. It is important to meet people where they are at and build up collective understanding and co-operation rather than result focussed competition, because to achieve meaningful social change we will need to move forward together. This is a consensual model which recognises the importance of minority opinions whilst also seeking to discover and nurture common ground. This presents an important alternative to the adversarial way that so much of our society is organised.

A further significant distinguishing feature of popular education is that it does not just stop at the point of understanding but provides non-hierarchical forums for discussion that also have an explicit focus on taking personal and collective action. It is not the popular educator's role to determine what this action may be; on learning about climate change some people may decide to change to energy saving light-bulbs, others may decide to get involved with the local Transition Initiative or campaign against airport expansion³. Rather, the educator can provide practical tools, resources, networks and trainings as well as inspirational examples of change. In subjects such as climate change, the facts can be alarming: statistics of extinction, extreme weather events such as flooding and hurricanes, etc. For this reason, we must allow time to explore the emotional responses to these facts before asking how we can incorporate this knowledge into our daily realities and what action we can take to respond.

By using this methodology Trapese draws on the history of popular education in social movements around the world. I will outline three examples of popular education in action; in each of these contexts

³ Transition Initiatives are local attempts to create an energy descent plan to deal with twin threats of climate change and peak oil <http://transitiontowns.org/>. An on-line pledge exists to resist Airport expansion with links to many groups working on this <http://www.airportpledge.org.uk/>

there was a pressing injustice that was challenged to strategic success.

1. Civil Rights movement in USA

Rosa Parks, who sparked the desegregation movement when she refused to give up her seat on a bus in 1955, had previously attended the Highlander School in Tennessee. Myles Horton, one of the founders, argued that ordinary people have the ability to understand and positively change their own lives⁴. At Highlander, along with Martin Luther King and other activists, Parks had been part of a programme which had taken literacy classes to poor black communities, teaching them to read and therefore enabling them to register to vote. They started classes by reading the Universal Declaration on Human Rights; the powerful language of all being equal encouraging those who attended citizenship schools to demand much more than the right to vote.

2. Argentinian neighbourhood circles, 2001 onwards

When, after 30 years of neo-liberal policies, the economic crisis now hitting the West hit Argentina in 2001, Roundtables for Autonomous Discussion and open platforms in neighbourhood assemblies became common features where people came together to talk about the roots of the financial crisis and possible solutions. These processes gave birth to an impressive array of autonomous projects including collective kitchens, re-occupied factories producing essential goods and community gardens, as people pulled together to pool their resources as the old order crumbled.⁵ Latin America has a rich history of popular education, most famously the work of Paolo Freire with illiterate peasants in Brazil. Freire argued that educators' role is to help people to analyse their situation so that they might improve it. Thus literacy programmes centred around the daily reality of the participants lives such as no access to land, and looked for the causes of these problems and how they could try and achieve change. Latin America today stands as an impressive example of standing up to oppression and constructing alternative visions.

3. Climate action movement in UK, 2005-present

Climate change, is increasingly identified as the greatest threat facing us today the evidence requires rapid and radical action to curb emissions. As well as several high profile Climate Camps in the UK and hundreds of direct actions, the climate action movement has given rise to an enormous amount of popular education. Thousands of workshops and talks have spread the word and activists are engaged in an ongoing process of self-education that tries to keep up with the complex realities of climate science, critique proposed solutions and develop skills for sustainable alternatives. This is just one example of many⁶ where grassroots activism develops alongside self-and collective education to build important and timely analyses of complex issues⁷.

⁴ Myles Horton and Paolo Freire together 'talked' the book *We make the road by walking*, edited by Horton, Freire and Brenda Bell (1991, Temple University Press), where they each discuss their implementation of popular education.

⁵ Natasha Gordon and Paul Chatterton (2004) *Taking back control: A journey through Argentina's popular uprising*. School of Geography, University of Leeds: Copyleft.

⁶Other examples include the anti GM movement, anti WTO/IMF mobilisations and campaigns. around the social impacts of agro- fuels.

⁷ See www.climatecamp.org.uk for further information on climate change activities.

Conclusion

The dangers of the current time are that our social and cultural institutions and behaviour are unable, ill-equipped or unwilling to instigate the sort of radical change that is needed in the time frame required. Almost monthly the rate of climate change, economic downturn and social breakdown seem to be increasing, according to various academic reports. These are challenging but potentially exciting times. Our entire society will need to co-operate to meet the challenges of adapting our economy and lifestyles to achieve the necessary cuts in emissions to avoid catastrophic climate change and the potential resulting social meltdown. A rapid and broad range of responses to these impending crises are required and universities can and should be one of the arenas where this will be played out. Alone, governments are unable to solve the problems at hand firstly because they are committed to endless economic growth and maintaining the status-quo. But secondly to address climate change requires a social revolution which changes many of the ways we live, from how we produce our food to how we organise our energy. This will only come from strong networks of solidarity and action and bottom up change. We will need everyone's genius and creativity and everyone must be involved for it to work, it cannot be merely legislated or imposed. The ethos of Transition Towns is illustrative here, "If we collectively plan and act early enough there's every likelihood that we can create a way of living that's significantly more connected, more vibrant and more in touch with our environment than the oil-addicted treadmill that we find ourselves on today." (TransitionTowns.org)

In this context what more appropriate preparation for life than for universities, or at least elements within them, to throw their resources and knowledge behind these positive movements for change, to prepare students to deal with the realities of the world that we are living in and come up with just and sustainable alternatives? I am not arguing that all formal teaching be abandoned or that this approach is appropriate to all topics. However, I call for academics to contribute to helping solve the problems by opening their doors and minds to the issues at hand. By doing so, they might explore with students possible links that relevant academic insights might have for developing a greater appreciation of current problems—and perhaps work with others to create solutions? Through popular education, the knowledge that is produced could be open source; popular educators would argue that it is not created for individuals to claim as their own or to achieve high grades. Some knowledge and understanding is far too important to remain in the inaccessible domain of the university library or in the university's coffers due to Intellectual Property Rights. Whilst previously the question may have been at what point and how we move from discussion and debate into action, in the current context the cycle of knowledge-action-reflection should be a constant throughout our learning process. Indeed, at what stage will we know that we have enough knowledge, sufficient research and intellectual backup to take the leap to action, and to be confident that is the only intelligent response?

Alice Cutler is a freelance popular educator, based in Bristol, part of the Trapeze collective and part time English as a foreign language teacher. She has been involved with grass-roots campaigning around social and environmental issues for the past ten years and is a firm believer in the transformative potential of

education. Alice.trapeze@gmail.com

For more information on Trapeze see www.trapeze.org. Also see *Do It Yourself, A Handbook for Changing Our World*, edited by the Trapeze Collective and published by Pluto Press, 2007. This book covers nine themes from food to popular education and combines theoretical analysis with concrete resources and how to guides for ethical and sustainable living. We have been told that it is a great teaching resource!

www.handbookforchange.org

The MA in Activism and Social Change at Leeds University is directed by Dr. Paul Chatterton, also member of Trapeze Popular Education Collective; see www.activismsocialchange.org.uk/