

Education as a Praxis of Soul Consciousness: Insinuations of Liberation Pedagogies in Higher Education and Human Rights Discourse

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Abstract The concept and practice of “education” are an Occidental (European) social/political construction created at the service of the perpetuation and expansion of the West. Consequently, all of its considerations: discourses about rights, laws, protections, about sovereignty, good, justice, or democracy have been developed (or not) only to the extent that they promoted Occidentalism and the Western modernity project. This theoretical inquiry is an attempt to engage in a “critical caution” for an argument of higher education as a “human right.” In addition, this inquiry attempts to understand power relations in education to imagine learning as a political activity as part of the architecture of human liberation and insinuate this value in the discourse of human rights and higher education.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept and practice of “education” are an Occidental (European) social/political construction created at the service of the perpetuation and expansion of the West. Consequently, all of its considerations: discourses about rights, laws, protections, about sovereignty, good, justice, or democracy have been developed (or not) only to the extent that they promoted Occidentalism and the Western modernity project.

This theoretical inquiry and pedagogical discernment is an attempt to engage in a “critical caution” for an argument of higher education as a “human right.” This inquiry attempts to understand power relations in education to imagine learning as a political activity (rather than work-force development) as part of the architecture of human liberation and insinuate this value in the discourse of human rights and higher education. This essay is a discursive toggle between the wiggle room of the discourse of higher education and human rights pedagogies of liberation. In this essay, I first discuss the overall assumptive framework of critiquing higher education and human rights. Second, I share my experiences in higher education (from the perspective and experience of doing popular education). Third, I offer critical questions that can guide a community in discerning higher education. Lastly, I conclude by reflecting on what higher education as a human right and as a practice of freedom (self-determination practice of democracy) could look like.

HIGHER EDUCATION SITUATED: IMPERIAL AND COLONIAL (MIS)INTENDED MOTIVES

Michael Apple argues that “education was not a neutral enterprise, that by the very nature of the institution, the educator was involved, whether he or she was conscious of it or not, in a political act” (Apple 2009, p. 1). I extend Michael Apple’s theory to the concept of higher education, seeing it as a vehicular mode for the Westernization and modernization of a particular community (often the Third World or emerging economies) where the market of higher education has not yet reached. Though the colonial and imperial motives include the explicit invitation

to the global market and commerce (through degrees and certification), what I am interested in is the epistemological encounter of higher education as represented by the idea of the university/college on the local community—that is, not so much the degree or certificate earned from the university/college but the values and ontologies that become imprinted, exchanged, and left out/in, in the individual or community where higher education is purported. In the final analysis, I am simply questioning the (hegemonic) motives of higher education as being a human right. I want to critically caution the idea that higher education can be a human right, a mandate that humanity aspires as part of the idealized trajectory of rights of humanity. In other words, educators ought to be aware of the danger seeing higher education as a human right that becomes codified into a right or rite de passage to as a deceptive way of facilitating the hegemony of Western epistemology and ontology—the modernization project of the soul. I am not arguing to make higher education not part of the architecture of a human right but rather question its genealogy and the politics and power of the hegemony of Western values and capitalism (disguised as globalization) has had on using higher education as a vessel for colonization and imperialism. It is less about whether higher education is a human right but more about the right to determine the right education for the right community.

The conventional critique of education to date has involved the argument about access and equity and for this particular issue as a “human right.” Even discourses of the “politics of education” have failed to situate education historically as a product and mechanism of a particular historical project of a particular empire. *The “politics of education” is misleading because it is a critique of education and not of the politics that created it.* Why would peoples of color, Asia and the Pacific, adapt a project and program that has been a device of their historical oppression and alienation? Having said all this, I do not yet throw away the idea that higher education or the institution of higher education should be abolished in this sense I am less in line with Ivan Illich’s idea of *deschooling* (Illich 1971) and more in line with Paulo Freire’s (Freire 2000) vision of pedagogical trajectory. We know too well the architecture of the Western modernity project but educators and learners have not to date created or developed our own. What follows is my experience in attempting to do and develop liberative pedagogies in state-sponsored higher education and offer up a framework that emerged out of my practice of doing popular education in grassroots communities.

NAKEM PEDAGOGY INSINUATED IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Reimagining Learning and Pedagogies of Resistance

After doing popular education among youth in the California Bay Area and Hawai'i, I was hired to teach in the Ilokano Language Program at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM) during my graduate program in Asian Studies. There, I began to teach in a more formal classroom setting and all the formalities dominated my experience.

The syllabus functioned like a contract. If it is not written, it does not have to be followed. Short, compact, linear, and repetitive learning governed the classroom. Make sure your grading is clear. No talk of spirit. No mention of G-d or the Sacred, or any spiritual traditions. The professor knows best, the students know the least. He or she is the teacher that teaches. Students sit and listen. It is all about the grades! Extra credit, yes please! Happy students = good evaluations. No complaints, no lawsuits. Semester done. Repeat.

All lectures point to what will be on the test and students meticulously write every word verbatim. Stories, whenever I used them, are viewed with ambivalence: "Will it be on the test?" is the enduring question I am asked.

Educational institutions shape the ethos of the classroom: The seats are lined up in straight rows and columns, facing the chalkboard, where the teacher will pontificate. Bodies, too, are structured—students face forward, their backs are the only visible thing to each other, all the while the teacher sees all the faces—in one policing glance and panoptical posture.

The architecture of the classroom is built so the teacher and student do not see each other in a meaningful relationality—a pedagogy of apartheid: teacher/student, head/soul, theory/experience; binaries, boundaries, and borders shape the knowledge and relationship (re)produced in the classroom. When is education a form of degradation? Under what condition does it destroy our curiosity for learning, for each other?

My soul was shrinking and I strongly believed the souls of my students were shrinking as well. In an effort to recapture what I gained from (or what I saw transpire in) my Berkeley and American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) experience working with youth, I decided to "unbound the classroom" and the formalized syllabus. I turned to Social Biography and made stories central. I restructured the classroom

so that it would revolve around the stories of the students—stories of their homes, parents, peoples—then we told stories in their homes, with their parents, in front of their peoples. In telling their stories, the students cried, laughed, got angry and scared, and became frustrated. I began to see that the students who initially complained about a two-and-a-half hour class for once a week would stay for a couple more hours to talk story and discuss the meaning of what they learned after class. This noticeable shift from detachment to a search for interconnectedness is what I call Nakem Pedagogy (soul consciousness).

I share this experience to demonstrate the hegemony of institutional pedagogy (banking method of instruction) and student's desire (at the same time fear) of a pedagogy of liberation. Higher education tends to have a pedagogy of assimilation and conformity, that is, the structure and method is largely similar no matter what part of the world you are in: The teacher is always positioned at the head of the classroom (and learning almost always happens within four walls of the building) while students sit in rows (almost always the teacher has the most use of verbal time). Because liberation pedagogies are most often insinuated rather than invited in or produced within higher education institutions, I believe it's necessary to discern and become aware of this tension in the fight for higher education as a human right.

Discerning Pedagogies of Liberation in Higher Education

Our soul shrinks in the classroom. Isolated, alone, and partitioned off from each other, our souls shrink when the four walls of the classroom do not allow us to speak to and hear each other. Our souls have the capacity to knock down or speak back to the four walls of the classroom, asking them their secrets and insights, only if we are able to reimagine what the walls can be for the community of learners.

Here, I use walls in two different ways. In one sense, walls can function as an artificial boundary that separate us from communities, our environments, our connectedness, and our ability to seek knowledge that can nurture life. In this sense, walls become those barriers that box us in from the larger world and, at the same time, isolate us from one another. These walls limit our understanding of ourselves while perpetuating and promoting "knowledge" from a singular space, separating the academic from the personal, theory from experience, spiritual from secular, and

anecdotal from empirical. The walls in this narrow definition become a fatalistic limitation.

In another sense, the four walls of the classroom can be imagined as the dynamic environment we live in—society at large. Walls in this sense represent the limitations of how far we can go and possibilities of the space we can transcend. Walls become the liminal space where we can discern where we are and where we want to go.

This dialogical relationship between our soul and the four walls can only happen when we can imagine the walls to be a container for learning and not an incarceration for domesticating the community of learners. Thus, walls ought to be always moving, inclusive, and expansive, but always a place in which the soul and the process of education make the self educable—the walls must be reimagined as our home, the streets, the land and ocean, popular culture, the near and far, and the now and then. Walls, in a liberatory sense, are seen as an invitation to transgress ones immediate limitation—a liminal space of possibility.

Here, Nakem Pedagogy or a pedagogy of soul consciousness could articulate and make audible the wounds that our bodies carry that are often hidden or suppressed in the classroom space. It could give insight into our experiences within colonial structures and how they can be transformed. In addition, it introduces and encourages the indigeneity of the students to become manifest in the classroom and thereby affecting curriculum.

In the time of this writing, which is a time of budget cuts, standardized curricula, testing based on common core standards, are becoming the dominant practice of educational institutions. The state-sponsored curriculum and textbooks are the students' primary instruments for learning in the K-12 educational arena. In higher education, though there are not any state-sponsored curricula, there are "cannons" or "classics" that are hailed and given the performatory function with a similar hegemonic scope. These texts are the primary instrument, codified in the holy syllabus and programitized in the sacred (or profane) curriculum. The answers to the test point toward the textbook. Because the "answer" is in the textbook, it creates a dangerous equivocation that the source of knowledge is found only in the textbook. Textbooks become an entrapment of learning and teaching—limiting the epistemological possibilities of understanding knowledge and the reality perceived.

Educators need to reimagine and resignify textbooks in multiple ways. When textbooks are reimagined, it can become a source of the

emancipatory site for learning. If we imagine textbooks simply as a container of knowledge, bounded in a single-space, read, and recited, though not necessarily in printed form, then it does not preclude us in seeing our soul as a textbook. Our soul carries in itself stories of ourselves and stories of how we perceive the world. These stories illuminate our experiences and inform and instruct us in navigating the world—these stories are also the basis of knowledge. Our stories as (unwritten) text, bounded together by our soul, become a textbook.

Nakem Pedagogy believes in the notion that the primary textbook that ought to be used in class is our soul. When we can conceive of the maxim: “everything we need to know we already know but we just do not know it yet” as true then all the (written) text in the traditional textbooks become equal to the text (story) embedded in our souls. It is not to say that the written word (books, articles, and scholarly materials) is valued less, rather the written words become deeper when it is situated in the lived experiences and immediate context of the world of the student/learner—only when there is a dialogical relationship between the written text and the text of the soul can a liberative and emancipatory education happen.

Nakem Pedagogy seeks to bring out, through our stories, the textuality of our soul—allowing us to engage the pages of our life and read the story that we carry in our soul. A pedagogy of soul consciousness makes center the reading of the story embedded in our bodies. The stories that reside in the soul, intersected and interwoven, become the foundation of a literacy/understanding of the soul.

When we can begin to learn through telling our own story and hearing the stories of others past and present experiences, we can resignify those stories that have shaped and molded us into who we did not want to be and to transform these stories in such a way that affirms who we want to become. Or rather, we rewrite and flip the script of the stories that have forced our souls to recite and inherit the story of the oppressors—in other words, we do not allow our stories to be a source of oppression—rather, our stories become a source of emancipation.

Because educators and learners become the stories that we tell, it matters what story is told of ourselves. If we hold stories that always see ourselves as a pathology—“lazy,” “uneducated,” “savage,” “slave,” and “colonized”—then our soul essentially becomes lazy, uneducated, savage, slave, and colonized. Stories have the power to write, mark, cut, severe, and fragment our soul. Stories via Social Biography help us to

see that our souls are written and offer a vehicle to rewrite, flip, reclaim, and decolonize the colonial experiences we have inherited and kept us fragmented from ourselves and each other. Stories framed through Social Biography have two interwoven capacities—it allows us to expose the depth of the soul wound and allows us to rewrite the stories that have limited our self.

However, in order for our souls to become mended (as oppose to fragmented) and our stories as a source of emancipatory wisdom, we need to understand the context that forced our souls in exilic silence and schizophrenic identity—that is to say, our souls have gone through potent, traumatic, social and political forces that have adversely affected the way we learn, understand ourselves, and construe the world we live in.

This force, namely, is the brutal encounter of colonization and the continued hegemonic instruments (*vis-à-vis* educational systems—schooling) that serves to sustain a colonized and fragmented self. Because the schooling process has largely been one of the primary tools used by the process of colonization, the classroom has been a site that has reinforced and privileged colonial values and narratives of domination/subordination. As a result, students are indoctrinated into a curriculum of assimilation and inherited an ontology of absence and fragmentation.

The soul, self, and ontology, though different and distinct, are inseparable and interrelated. I cannot see a fragmented self with a whole soul and ontology. Neither do I see a fragmented ontology that can result in a non-fragmented self and soul. Furthermore, a malnourished soul is a result of a fragmented self and ontology. Because all three are inseparable, I use all three interchangeably.

In my experience teaching in Hawai'i at the University as well as conducting popular education in various communities in Hawai'i and California, I have witnessed many of my students, when asked to speak about why their parents or grandparents moved to Hawai'i and the USA (majority of my students are between first and third generations), will reiterate the institutionalized myth of the material promise of the "American Dream." They consistently make reference to the Philippines as a place of "suffering," "backwardness," and a place that one should leave in order to live a "better life." In their view, America is where dreams come true and the Philippines is where nightmares are born. In fairness, they do not have the tools to consider their colonial pedagogical inculcation. What forces

shape or give credence to this recurring imaginary of America and the Philippines? How can Nakem Pedagogy challenge and disrupt this perennial view? Given this entrenched view, I situate Nakem Pedagogy and the current educational milieu in a neopostcolonial context. That is, we are living in a reality that has to a certain extent shed the formality of colonialism and slipped into a more sophisticated arena of psychic and somatic enslavement and linguistic manipulation—colonial relationships have moved from feudalism to capitalism, master/slave to producer/consumer, and imperialism to globalization.

Students and teachers who want to teach and learn with a liberatory trajectory must be aware of the reality that has shaped their traumas and experiences, individual and collective, and challenge spaces that perpetuate and sustain its violent existence. In doing so, we will be able to name structures, systems, and narratives that are sustaining our fragmented soul and identity. In turn, we will be able to remember or at least conceive of a past for/of our self/soul that was not colonized—consequently, it will give us hope for an ontology that is not constructed on the ideals of a colonial imagination. In the final analysis, a soul-consciousness pedagogy will have profoundly reoriented education as a practice of self-becoming and a reclamation and realization of one's historical selfhood.

Nakem Pedagogy in its visions toward a liberatory education pushes the pedagogical boundaries to account for the use of stories, communities, indigenous wisdoms, and our soul consciousness.

Nakem Pedagogy as an iteration of a liberation pedagogy insinuated itself from the community into the classroom. Even as I was able to bring the pedagogy into the classroom, I felt a strong resistance and questioned whether this pedagogy is able to situate itself permanently or simply insinuate itself and its values instead of becoming a part of the university and higher education.

CRITICAL CAUTIONS AND QUESTIONS

The university is not (and never has been) a site of liberation. Its own genealogy and historical tendency to cater to the ruling class while perpetuating its own interests do not say otherwise. It has, however, a tendency to appropriate spaces that have projects and aims of liberation; close enough that it can provoke and evoke a space for the discourse of liberation but far enough that the ideals of liberation do not threaten its power and capital to reproduce itself as a machinery of colonization and capitalism.

The assumption of the *right to* and *pursuit of* higher education precludes the problem and contradiction of its own genealogy. It also avoids the problem of the historical relationship between power and education.

The problem is not Western “style,” Western “architecture,” or Western “lens.” Education (and higher education) was not a universal concept nor a preexisting form which was subsequently observed through a European “lens” and then developed. It is an Occidental construct developed and promulgated by the West in the service of the west. Higher education, in particular, has historically been a principle construct of the machinery of Westernization, including European expansion, the Christianization project, and neoliberalism. It preceded mass public education, which was much later developed as an appendage to higher education.

What is the critical caution and how do you detect or become aware of these colonial and imperial tendencies and create buffers from being in proximities of appropriation? Here are some guiding questions that I offer as general starting points:

Is profit involved, if so, who profits from this project?

What are the benefits the community receives, particularly communities who suffer from class, gender, and racial discrimination?

Why do they need a university/higher education?

How does a degree or certificate support their right to self-determination?

Does it further entrench their alienation in global capitalism?

Does it (further) stratify the already existing social and economic order?

Does it commodify indigenous/native wisdom and put it in danger of “certification colonization”?

What is the concept of “wealth” in the language of the community?

What is wealth that is non-monetized?

Does the curriculum in higher education perpetuate and uphold this non-monetized wealth as a public good?

Who is necessitating and leading the need for higher education?

Who will become the authority in teaching and implementing the curriculum?

What models and examples can we learn from that impacted communities (for better and for worse) in pursuing higher education?

What does higher education look like if it was not owned or financed by government or corporations look like?

How does higher education as Western construct fit into a healthy ecology of the community?

Is there space for working-class women of color?

Does higher education build power for the oppressed?

In the process of discerning these questions, it is not enough to ask and answer as an individual theoretical practice but must be answered in a collective process especially including among the most affected by the sociopolitical, cultural, and economic impacts of higher education.

Toward a Human Right for the Right Education

Higher education is an institution that will be around in the foreseeable future. I do not see the institution of higher education going away and becoming obsolete, as far as an economic and sociopolitical unit in society and the globalized world. And because I do not see liberation pedagogy or the trajectory of liberation being fostered/cultivated in higher education nor do I see higher education as becoming accessible to the minority communities of the world, the discourse of higher education as a human right must rest itself in the tension of liberation and assimilation (to ruling class values and interest) if it takes serious the plight of oppressed people (largely those who have been alienated and marginalized at the expense of the process of development and the project of modernity). My hope is that this essay will serve as a general starting point in a critique of the institution of higher education, as an example of pedagogy that could insinuate community/grassroots ideals of liberation, and as a critical caution when higher education is being discoursed within the human rights framework. In the final analysis, I am hopeful that the trajectory of higher education as a human right will bend toward the discourse of what kind of education do we want as a human right.

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