

Teaching to Save the World: Avoiding Circles of Certainty in Social Justice Education

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The greatest risk to social justice education lies in what it hopes to redress: restrictions on the possibility for a new future. Social justice educators may lapse into what Paulo Freire called “circles of certainty” when they believe that they *know* how to pursue a more just future or they *know* the shape a more just future should take.¹ This form of knowing encloses social justice pedagogy, its students, and its teachers in circles of certainty that limit possibilities, in terms of both what actions may be taken in order to work toward a more just future and what a more just future would entail. Opening the space for the many possibilities of social justice education will require a move away from *knowing* to *thinking*.

In this essay, I challenge the increasingly common link between social justice education and classroom-generated student activism by showing that such an approach may, in fact, constrain possibilities for social justice itself. School-generated social justice action has the potential to limit students’ perception of the scope of social justice work temporally, as occurring within a school year or semester, and spatially, as just another *school* activity that is monitored and assessed by teachers. Such action may perpetuate our society’s rush for easy answers, quick fixes, and hit-and-run community service, rather than fostering sustained engagement and commitments to social justice. Of even greater concern is that, despite the best intentions, social justice education has the danger of subverting student *thinking* in efforts to stimulate student *activism*. Social justice educators may, wittingly or unwittingly, quell their students’ thinking when they enlist them in their own projects.

I explore an alternative vision for social justice education that entails creating a space for the new, that is, creating a sanctuary for the activity of thinking.² Drawing upon Hannah Arendt’s concept of natality, and her call for us to “think what we are doing,” I offer a pedagogical model that asks social justice educators to “save the world” by holding open a space for the new and truly revolutionary to flourish by jettisoning what we *know* needs to be done in the name of social justice. This model draws upon Arendt’s thought to develop an image of a liberatory and radical teaching posture for social justice educators. I conclude with an examination of the possibilities and challenges for this kind of teaching.

EXAMINING THE LINK BETWEEN SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION AND STUDENT ACTIVISM

While certainly not a new concept, the phrase “social justice,” in relation to education and teaching, has grown tremendously in the last twenty years. The kind of social justice education that I criticize here uses student activism as a pedagogical strategy and/or an educational end. I am not addressing teachers’ commitment to

teaching all students equitably.³ Nor am I criticizing theories that attach a significant social import to teaching and consequently link the source of educator responsibility to justice issues.⁴ Teachers' impetus for their work, no matter how traditional or radical, is beyond the scope of this essay. Rather, I am looking at the intersection of teaching and social justice in explicitly curricular and pedagogical ways.

Connie North's recent *Teachers College Record* article offers an extensive review of the social justice literature, and highlights many assumptions that are built into the various theories of social justice education. In particular, she notes that most authors writing on this subject believe that "education for social change requires that students and teachers actively transform social injustices, not just study them."⁵ While nearly all theories emphasize social justice action, the emphasis on student activism as a component of the teaching itself varies. For instance, North reads Joyce King's work as calling for a critical reading of the existing social order that will lead to future action. Others, such as Elizabeth Ellsworth and Deborah Britzman, engage a particular kind of performative action in order to disrupt students' assumptions and privilege within the classroom. Some, following Amy Gutmann's work, argue that social justice education entails making classrooms democratic places. Still others, such as Jean Anyon, advocate social justice action as a way *into* social justice education. While North aptly dissects the various relationships between knowledge and action, she does not question the assumption that social justice education and social justice action *should* be linked. None of the concepts examined in North's analysis indicate how the link between knowledge and action has the potential to limit students' available discourses, and their potential actions in the public realm. It is for this reason that I draw upon Hannah Arendt's work in order to liberate thinking within social justice education.

Thinking, in Arendt's view, is a noninstrumental, but essential, activity. Reading Arendt as a dualist who splits thinking and action is not quite right. Rather, Arendt posits thinking as an activity with its own integrity and purpose. Thinking is not a dependent activity that is made useful only when it leads to some other activity. Therefore, the relentless push for "critical thinking" documented by North is different in quality and kind than the kind of thinking Arendt describes. Arendt's version of thinking is less a form of critical consciousness that is formed in praxis or performativity than a meditative and contemplative event that requires withdrawal from the social and public world.

To better illustrate the contrast between social justice education for action and social justice education rooted in thinking, I will examine briefly a number of positions that rely upon student activism as a pedagogical strategy. I offer a selection of resources that address the spectrum of academic and practitioner audiences. In a section of *Radical Possibilities* entitled "Classrooms as Movement-Building Spaces," Jean Anyon explains that the "activities in this section provide teachers with strategies to assist urban youth in moving from self-blame or angry rebellion to well-informed political engagement."⁶ She suggests that teachers can work with students on political projects, such as issue campaigns, in order to form alliances and create change in their communities.⁷ Similarly, in a professional higher education

publication, Stephan Quaye advocates student learning *through* activism, and believes that such an approach will combat cynicism by cultivating students' capacity for hope in action.⁸ In *Rethinking Schools*, a practitioner-oriented magazine, teacher Bill Bigelow offers suggestions for how other K–12 educators might include their students in campaigns for global (social) justice.⁹ A website created by Todd Bannon entitled “Encouraging Student Activism” promises, “Educators at both the secondary and college level will find resources for creating classrooms that are springboards for activism.”¹⁰ Each of these scholars holds in common the belief that social justice understanding arises through action, and that this action is directed most often by the teacher.

All of these authors advocate student activism in the service of worthy goals — student empowerment, positive self-image, political engagement, and meaningful connections between the old and young. Activism as a social justice teaching strategy responds to our current educational crisis of alienation, apathy, acquisitiveness, and disenfranchisement by defining social justice through a particular set of actions. As yet, however, no analysis points to the ways that basing social justice education on activism has the potential to limit students' possibilities of contributing to a more just world. Read from the perspective of Arendt's work, social justice education along these public and activist lines is far from the kind of activity that will, in Arendt's words, “save the world.” Rather, by thrusting students into the public too soon, such education runs the risk of destroying and distorting the newness that each individual student offers the world. Moreover, social justice education becomes trapped in a circle of certainty, where students come to “know” the actions necessary for the realization of social justice, rather than dwelling in an ongoing engagement with the question of social justice itself. While these authors would likely suggest that the activism developed in their classrooms is student-generated, as opposed to teacher-directed, it is unlikely that students feel unconstrained by the teachers' perspective on social justice, and particularly by the teachers' assumption that social justice is achieved through particular actions.

AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL OF SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION

It might seem strange to argue for a model of social justice education that relies on Arendt's concept of natality, or the newness that each human being brings to the world, for it is true that she conceived of schools as prepolitical places that mediate the private and public realms. Saving the world, from an Arendtian perspective, requires that schools serve as sanctuaries for the most essential student activity: thinking. Despite her seemingly apolitical approach to education, Arendt concludes her essay “The Crisis in Education” with a stirring plea for adults to “love the world” and “assume responsibility for it,” which resonates with educators committed to social justice. She calls on educators to conserve our shared world and protect what is new and revolutionary in the young. Here are Arendt's words that have moved so many who care deeply about setting the world right through education:

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and the young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world

and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.¹¹

However, drawing on Arendt's powerful rhetoric without ample context for her argument has the potential to misrepresent and distort her thought. In particular, it would be an error to assume that Arendt would endorse the school-based activism that some teachers view as a cornerstone of social justice pedagogy.

When taken in light of Arendt's other work, rather than as an inspirational slogan, her call to "save the world from ruin" requires that adults protect the world *from* the young, and that the young be protected *from* the world. Hence, schools might be seen as sanctuaries that shelter students prior to their emergence in the public realm. In "Reflections on Little Rock" and "The Crisis in Education," Arendt rails against adults who have made children political actors too soon. In so doing, adults neglect their own responsibilities in the world. For Arendt, schools are not sites to foment political action or initiate political change. Arendt criticizes explicitly adults for the politicization of students and schools. She believes that adults have instrumentalized the young in order to advance their own unresolved political projects, and that they have abandoned children in the world under the guise of freedom. However, it would also be an error to assume that Arendt's characterization of schools as "prepolitical" places renders teaching an apolitical activity. Teaching to save the world involves preservation and conservation *as a political act*, by teachers who must deliberately *choose* to protect natality.

The essence of natality is that we do not and should not presume to *know* the shape of the future. Arendt explains,

The problem is simply to educate in such a way that a setting-right [of the world] remains actually possible, even though it can, of course, never be assured. Our hope always hangs on the new which every generation brings; but precisely because we can base our hope only on this, we destroy everything if we so try to control the new that we, the old, can dictate how it will look.¹²

Social justice education that engages students as political actors through the instigation or facilitation of their teachers runs counter to Arendt's call to protect natality. The responsibilities that Arendt assigns to educators in "The Crisis in Education" require a particular *kind* of action that is not to be mistaken for activism. While activism in teaching often embodies the best of intentions, it also carries with it the danger of quelling students' own thinking, enlisting them as pawns in our own political projects, and preempting the possibility of the truly revolutionary emerging by exposing students' natality to "the harsh light of the public" too soon. Extending Arendt's criticism, I envision social justice education as the radical *creation* and *preservation* of a teaching space — the space of the in-between, the space for the new — the sanctuary where thinking is possible. Eduardo Duarte also has applied Arendt's work to pedagogy in schools. He explains that Arendt "offers us a vocabulary for developing models of teaching and learning that preserve and cultivate a space for contemplation."¹³ I imagine that the radicalism of social justice pedagogy lies not in mobilizing students to action or raising their political consciousness, but in preserving and protecting their potential for the new.

Hannah Arendt's concept of natality adds another dimension to the knowledge/action tension in social justice education. Thinking, in an Arendtian framework, cannot be characterized as inactivity. Thinking itself is an activity, one that is increasingly threatened by the daily busyness of life. For Arendt, saving the world depends upon preserving natality. It is not overt oppression that is the world's greatest danger, according to Arendt, but banality. Thinking is the antidote to banality, as it challenges the previously accepted and well-worn ideas of the past. The places where thinking is encouraged and fostered are diminishing. As a result, we must fight to protect those places where it might flourish, where the new has the chance to develop. School may be one of those places where thinking can continue to flourish; yet, it is continually threatened by activities that threaten thinking itself.¹⁴

AN IMAGE OF A SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATOR: TEACHING IN THE IN-BETWEEN

In this section, I appropriate Arendt's image of "He" who stays and fights the opposing forces of past and future, and who holds his ground in order to create space for the new, to envision an image of social justice education that values the activity of thinking. Arendt admittedly had little to say about teachers or teaching itself. I have used her philosophical work in order to offer a new pedagogical model for social justice education. In this alternative model, not only do teachers hold open a temporal gap between past and future, but they also carve open a space between the competing demands of private and public life.¹⁵ In connecting social justice pedagogy with Arendt's work, I conceive that teachers' special responsibility is to fight the fight between past and future for their students in order to create a clearing, a space, where the new can be nurtured. Teachers, by engaging in the fight between past and future, free their students to cultivate their newness, rather than encouraging them to wear it out by taking on the battle too soon.

The image I draw for social justice educators and the space they create arises from Arendt's reading of one of Kafka's parables, from his collection of aphorisms entitled *HE*, in her introduction to the collection of essays *Between Past and Future*, in which "The Crisis in Education" appears. Arendt reads the parable as a description of a "thought-event"¹⁶ and the "time sensation of the thinking ego."¹⁷ I read the in-between of the figure "He," in the parable, as carving out a space for teaching that reconceptualizes teaching for social justice as a radical posture that does not point to the shape the future will take, or lapse into a circle of certainty, but, instead, creates a clearing where the future may take shape — that is, a space for thinking in the present.

In Kafka's parable, "He" is located between the opposing forces of past and future; "He" is propelled forward by the past and pushed backward by the future. The past seeks to determine the future, and the future aims to obliterate the past. However, presumably without "His" presence, there would be no battle at all. "He," located between the past and the future, enables the existence of a sense of past, present, and future. As Arendt reads the parable, "His" insertion in the present *creates* a past and a future. Although Arendt does not use this language in the context of the parable, "He" is the essence of natality itself, since natality requires an old world, the past, to serve as a background to its newness. Likewise, the future must

be a live concept at which the new can aim, if natality is to matter at all. Yet the force of the future can also threaten to destroy the existence of the present, where “He” is located. “He” longs to leap out of the middle, hover above, and referee the fight — standing in judgment, and ruling in favor of either the past or the future. The presence of “He,” the presence of natality, represents the hope for the preservation of the world by staving off the certainty sought by both the past and the future. “He” is located in the space of the in-between, the space of the new.

Arendt’s analysis adds a spatial dimension to Kafka’s temporal parable. She envisions the gap between past and future as a three-dimensional space, rather than simply a moment in time that is represented as a two-dimensional segment on a line. The shift from a linear sense of time to the creation of space is made possible because “He” is inserted between the forces of past and future. “He” occupies a location, not only a temporal modality. Once “He” exists between past and future, the angles of force are deflected by “His” presence and change course. The past takes a new direction as it shoots forward to the present. Likewise, the future’s trajectory shifts as it refers back to the past. The in-between space that is created between past and future, argues Arendt, is the space of freedom, because it shifts the direction of the forces. The gap is the space of freedom, of the possible, and of the new because “He” is positioned between the past and the future, thus rupturing any strict temporal causality. The past and the future are not givens. The rupture caused by “His” presence enables the new to emerge, because it is where thinking is possible. Neither the past nor the future determine “His” being. Far from being located “no place,” or merely coursing along the stream of time, “He” clears a space buffeted, but not overtaken, by the past and future.

I have appropriated Arendt’s reading of “He” in order to sketch an image of teachers’ action that can simultaneously protect our common world and preserve the natality of the young. The educational space of the present that is held open by teachers contains the possibility of the new. In contrast to ushering students into the future, and into the public, through activism, holding open the space enables new forms of engagement with the world to emerge. “Loving the world” requires that teachers cannot leap out of the in-between — the space between past and future — and leave students to fend for themselves. The teacher must remain in this place with students, and cannot abandon them to their own devices. Social justice educators battle with the forces of past and future that conspire to eliminate newness and, simultaneously, to destroy the world. Rather than imposing or projecting their visions of the future on students, as might be the case in teaching as activism, teachers who hold open the space between past and future are themselves changing the forces of the past and future that aim to destroy the present.

The gap between past and future enables thought, and thought enables natality to be cultivated when it is protected. The expression and exploration of natality are what promise to renew our common world. By holding open this space, and by working to keep the past or future from exerting their overwhelming force on the young, teachers enable students’ possibility for thinking. Yet, the educator’s “profession requires of him an extraordinary respect for the past.”¹⁸ This respect

recognizes the strength and power that the past has not only to illuminate, but also to crush. The past must be placed in abeyance, not so the young do not have contact with it, but so they may be able to engage it from the perspective of thought, and the perspective of the new.

The responsibilities that Arendt assigns educators in “The Crisis in Education” require a particular *kind* of action that is not to be mistaken for activism. While activism in teaching often embodies the best of intentions, it also carries with it the danger of quelling students’ own thinking, enlisting them as pawns in our own political projects, and preempting the possibility that the truly revolutionary can emerge by exposing students’ natality to “the harsh light of the public” too soon. I hear Arendt’s call for the conservation of the world and the preservation of natality as a twist on conceptions of teaching for social justice. I read Arendt’s vision of teaching as the radical *creation* and *preservation* of a teaching space — the space of the in-between, the space for the new. In this sense, social justice education depends little on mobilizing students to action or raising political consciousness; it depends, instead, on preserving students’ potential for the new and revolutionary. At the same time, the young’s potential for the new and revolutionary also endangers our common world. Thus, we need to introduce students to the world, rather than unleashing it upon them, or them upon it.

THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS OF TEACHING IN THE IN-BETWEEN

At this point, an entirely legitimate question can be posed: What actually serves as content for social justice education when thinking, rather than action, serves as the guide? I have struggled with these questions in teaching a course entitled “Education and Social Justice” to undergraduates at a liberal arts college. I wanted to offer a version of the past that did not render students cynical or impotent, but that showed how everyday individuals made decisions and took actions that improved the world. Even though action would not be a part of this course, I certainly did not want to enclose students in the circle of certainty that made them feel as though the world were an immutable, settled place that had no room for their newness. Despite my efforts to show students how social justice could be achieved at multiple levels, the past did exert its potential to immobilize, as students expressed a sense of being overwhelmed by the vast injustice that required “correction.” Circles of certainty threatened to enclose them in nihilistic passivity.

As a way to engage students in social justice thinking, rather than in public action, the students’ semester-long final project was to create a social justice and education proposal of their own design. Students created projects that identified a problem related to social justice and education; substantiated the problem with research and data; analyzed earlier attempts to address the problem; developed a proposal to address the problem; and argued for why their proposal would be more effective, just, educational, and so forth than previous efforts had been. Through this practice, students were able to think through possible pathways into the future, without having a specific action, present or future, prescribed for them. I arrived at the idea for a social justice and education proposal as the most significant assessment for the course because I could not imagine grading students’ public engagement.

What this project proposal assignment allowed me to do was assess students on their quality of thinking. Yet, I continue to be troubled by the ways in which I endorse, intentionally or unintentionally, particular approaches to social justice, while diminishing others. I found myself asking: In what ways does what we *know* about social justice foreclose the possibility for a new future? How does our knowledge deem what “counts” as suitable social justice action?

I am left feeling uncertain about the role that teachers and classrooms should play as students encounter their activist selves. I think that the El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn has managed to strike a balance between thinking and action — one that requires coordination between schools and community-based organizations. According to a report written by El Puente mathematics teacher Beth Lev Wehner, students in the Academy engage in social justice thinking through intensive research portfolio projects that examine community concerns.¹⁹ While the students may engage in activism around these issues as a result of their research, their activism occurs not through the auspices of the school, but rather through the community-based organization, the umbrella agency that houses the school. As far as classroom activities are concerned, students develop reports based on careful research on issues such as bank lending practices, toxic dumping, and childcare, and they turn their findings over to the community-based organization. What happens in their classrooms is thinking, rather than acting in a way that forecloses other possibilities and entraps them in a circle of certainty.

In conclusion, this alternative model for social justice is not about inaction. Rather, it is about preserving the possibility of action. It also involves the risk that students may not go on to participate in social justice activism. What many educational theorists and practitioners writing about social justice seek is a kind of insurance that students will go on to advocate for social justice later in their lives. However, in attempting to attenuate this risk, classroom-generated activism encloses students in circles of certainty.

Teaching in the social justice model I offer is an active pedagogy of preservation, rather than a posture of passivity. School offers a sanctuary where students may learn thinking. This space for the new not only protects natality; it also gives students a glimpse into what the world has in store. It is a middle space between the private realm of home and the public sphere of the preexisting social world. It is a place of cultivation and growth that offers promise for renewing our common world. Arendt worried about the encroachment of banality into all aspects of life, and social justice is not immune. Thinking is the antidote to banality. Social justice education requires thinking to envision a more just world. It is a concept and a commitment, not a catchphrase.

1. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970; repr., New York: Continuum, 2005), 20–21.

2. My use of this term comes from Eduardo Duarte, “The Eclipse of Thinking: An Arendtian Critique of Cooperative Learning,” in *Hannah Arendt and Education: Renewing Our Common World*, ed. Mordechai Gordon (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 2001), 216.

3. Ana María Villegas, "Dispositions in Teacher Education: A Look at Social Justice," *Journal of Teacher Education* 58, no. 5 (2007): 370–380.
4. Jeannie Oakes and Martin Lipton, *Teaching to Change the World*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006).
5. Connie North, "What Is All This Talk About 'Social Justice'? Mapping the Terrain of Education's Latest Catchphrase," *Teachers College Record* 110, no. 6 (2008), 1194.
6. Jean Anyon, *Radical Possibilities: Public Policy, Urban Education, and a New Social Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 188.
7. *Ibid.*, 189.
8. Stephan John Quaye, "Hope and Learning: The Outcomes of Contemporary Student Activism," *About Campus* 12, no. 2 (2007), 6.
9. Bill Bigelow, "Rethinking Globalization: Teaching and Organizing Against Sweatshops," *Rethinking Schools Online* 17, no. 1 (2002), <http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/17?01/Orga171.shtml>.
10. Todd Bannon, "Encouraging Student Activism," <http://www.eduactivism.org/index.html>.
11. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 196.
12. *Ibid.*, 192.
13. Duarte, "Eclipse of Thinking," 215.
14. Duarte has explored this idea in relation to the inability of students to withdraw and think as a result of cooperative learning (see Duarte, "Eclipse of Thinking").
15. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 188.
16. *Ibid.*, 10.
17. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: One/Thinking* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 202.
18. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 193.
19. Beth Lev Wehner, "El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice: Bridging Youth, Education, and Community," in *Community Youth Development Journal* 2, no. 3 (2001), <http://www.cydjournal.org/2001Summer/CBO.html>.