Re-imagining Social Justice Learning

Through Critical Arts Education

by

Elizabeth Wood, PhD

Department of Integrated Studies in Education
Faculty of Education
McGill University

e.wood@mcgill.ca
(514) 495-8154
Re-imagining Social Justice Learning through Critical Arts Education:

(Or: For a just and sustainable world, who should our students think they are?)

In recent decades, literatures emerging from theoretical frameworks grounded in social/critical theory have significantly impacted educational theory and practice in Canada (Apple, 1996; Freire, 1993; Giroux, 1997; McLaren, 1998). Despite Canada’s 1971 official policy on multiculturalism, the necessity of justice in and through education has become for many a central issue. Current educational praxis from pre-school to postgraduate studies is informed by emerging literatures in the areas of belonging and exclusion, difference and diversity, and power and inequality (Enns & Sinacore, 2005; Evans-Winters, 2005; Mahalingam & McCarthy, 2000; Nieto, 2008; Shor, 1992; Shor & Pari, 1999; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995).

In this paper, by arguing in support of what I refer to as critical arts education, I will draw on these literatures, emphasizing the subtle difference between social justice in the classroom and social justice through the classroom. In opposition to a hegemonic model of education which propagates existing social inequities, I will propose a model of critical arts education which advocates integrating the social, spiritual, affective and political with a view to re-visioning social justice education.

1. Introduction

In my first week of teaching post 911, I asked my class of non-artist, future teachers at McGill to complete the following sentence: “Art is…….” One of them wrote: “necessary”. This single word captures the urgency and the simplicity of what I see to be the role of arts education: a tool (among other things) for creating the conditions through which critical pedagogy may scaffold the way to a just and sustainable model of education. This teaching would be found at the intersection of education, the arts, and social justice and equity education.
Like critical pedagogy, arts education cultivates an environment committed to raising questions, challenging individuals (often so that we reconsider), asking us to be critical, hopeful, skeptical, expansive, to stretch our consciousness and powers of negotiation, deepen our awareness, our capacity for reflection, broaden our ability to listen, to hear, and to speak, in short to construct our world view slowly, one small step at a time (Greene, 1995). Both arts education and critical pedagogy help us imagine a future of possibility, one that is “other” than today. Greene describes this as: “… a mode of utopian thinking: thinking that refuses mere compliance, that looks down roads not yet taken to the shapes of a more fulfilling social order, to more vibrant ways of being in the world.” Her words remind me of those of another philosopher of education, Sam Keen, who writes of living with “vividness” (Keen, 1970). These things, I believe, are possible when education and art join forces in the name of social change for the better.

I’ve given this paper a very snazzy title: Re-imagining Social Justice Learning through Critical Arts Education OR For a just and sustainable world, who should our students think they are? This is my attempt to stuff into one sentence all the things that I think need addressing. Basically, I would like to look at what we, in schools, can do to help foster a world where social justice, education, and the arts intersect on a path toward sustainability for our society and our planet. The scaffolding upon which I will structure this discussion is a body of literature deriving from the brand of social/critical theory that has had significant influence in education. While the seemingly most important concepts are all stuffed into the first part of my serious, solidly tenured title, I think the real gist of my discussion will lie in its Rocky and Bullwinkle subtitle: For a just and sustainable world, who should our students (in Education) think they are? Who should future educator allow themselves to imagine themselves to be. Let’s think about that for a minute. “Just who should they think they are?” At first glance, this rhetorical question is, of course, laden with the particular haughtiness most characteristic of the weary mother of an
inquisitive and energetic four year old. When your mother asks that question, embedded in it is the implicit observation that you, the four year old, think you’re better than you are. More than you are. She’s trying to put you in your place. That rhetorical question *Just who do you think you are*, coming from her, carries on its back the sole desire to tame a youngster’s self-confident, omnipotent sense of self-worth. What is of educational significance in that question is that it would seem to call a halt to that young one’s perceived capacity to effect change on her environment. At least temporarily. Problem is, over time, it sticks. It can – and often does – last a lifetime. The end result of this process is an adult who, as a result of this, is made somehow smaller - an adult who does not take risks. This, in my view, serves ultimately to limit critical thinking, to limit one’s becoming involved, and eventually to stifling any belief that they can make a difference. While this may seem somewhat dramatic, my experience as learner and teacher tells me that it is grounded in reality. In this paper I would like to suggest that discussion of education, the arts and social justice is impacted by a pair of fundamental questions: The first is: *Just who should our students think they are?* Its counterpart is: *Who has the Right?* I hope the relationship between these will become clear by the end of this discussion.

2. **Just who should our students think they are? (Qui a le droit?)**

*Just who should they think they are?* I have chosen to touch on this question because I think that it powerfully captures one of the most embedded, but rarely named, challenges to social justice, with respect to values and education: the fact that much of formal education – implicitly and even explicitly - asks that rhetorical question of its students. Eventually, they get it. As Charles Taylor has pointed out (Taylor & Gutmann, 1992), “The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the mis-recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false,
distorted, and reduced mode of being. “ While Taylor’s comments refer to issues such as racism, I think that this same phenomenon is at work in terms of the messages that we give young people when we ask – explicitly or implicitly – Just who should they think they are? They think they are less, can do less, have less power. They end up being put in their place, silenced, told by the institution at a fundamental level, that their questions, concerns, needs, curiosities are insignificant. That they were wrong for thinking that they had the right to question, to challenge, to think.

My first real understanding of the power of the “Just who did I think I was?” kind of moment occurred in 2001 when I first encountered the concept of Sustainability at a 3 day conference-workshop Orangeville, Ontario, for a group of some 25 pan-Canadian educators. Although I had been working in the area of Social Justice Education for nearly a decade by then, I wasn’t at all clear on what the concept of sustainability was all about. I attended the conference because, well – to be honest, I was invited, and needed to a break from the urban stresses of Montreal. I accepted the invitation to attend, hoping simply to meet new people, to learn something new, and to try to get a break from a threatening student at the time. To my surprise, I quickly learned in those discussions of the third spoke in the tri-partite sustainability wheel. There --- next to economic and environmental sustainability --- was the area of social sustainability. Then came for me the realization that the things that I think about all the time, care passionately about, the concerns that I have for the future and for education, are connected to a much bigger, and nameable, world project. That was for me -- as it is for many - an important moment, tremendously informative and empowering. Yet what I have realized, with some shock, since is the fact that, despite nearly two decades of university teaching at an ivy-league-of- the-north institution (most of this in the area of critical pedagogy) I was in that moment of awareness thrust back into a situation where, moving from the periphery to the centre, conceptually, raised for me the question: *Qui a le droit?* How could I participate in as discussion on sustainability? I didn’t
have the right., or so I thought. From that experience, emerged the nucleus of this talk. What disempowers most, in terms of participating on a small or even a larger scale in school, in community, in life, I think, is the sense that you have no right. That it’s not for you. That it’s not your job to take responsibility. That it’s up to someone else.

This experience harkened back to my general awareness as a child where, more often than not, I didn’t “have the right”. I hold responsible my experience of formal education, at least in part, for that. A skinny kid from rural Ontario, I was conditioned by a well-meaning school system and pre-structuralist parenting to see myself as separate from the world, object not subject, devoid of any agency…. In my Orangeville moment of realization, I became poignantly mindful of the necessity of teaching toward that “aha” experience, that Frierian moment where students realize that, as individuals, they have a right to interact, to question, to contribute, and eventually to participate in effecting change. This recent experience not only mirrors my own lurching and wrenching path through educational mine-fields, but I have also seen this experience on the faces of young people in my classes. How many of our students, or even of our student teachers, have been diminished into good behavior, made smaller, had their questions shrivel up, and their sense of their right and responsibility to interact with the world made redundant, because of an institution that asks for too often: Just who should they think they are? Experiences like that did too much damage, damage that most of us are working to undo in our teaching today.

The question, then, is this. What are the values that we need in order to foster (and here is where my snazzy title comes in: Re-imagining Social Justice Learning through Critical Arts Education: (Or: For a just and sustainable world, who should our students think they are?) What I mean by this is what are the values that we need when we teach – regardless of the educational contexts in which we find ourselves – such that individuals learn that they have a legitimate right to participate in the creation of a socially just and sustainable world. It seems to me that this is a
foundational question. I will of course not be able to answer it here, in all its complexity, but I do
hope to make a few observations about what I think are some of the key components. To do this,
in the following sections of my discussion, I’ll touch briefly on a) the embedded-ness of values;
b) courage & responsibility, and finally c) reflection, response & interaction with the world.

3. Values: Embedded and invisible

Embedded in the worlds in which we circulate are values. As art critic Suzi Gablik has observed,
many are aware that the system isn’t working, and that it’s time work to revise what she calls “the
destructive myths that guide us” (Schapiro, 1999). While many of Gablik’s “destructive myths
that guide us” are explicit, many are not. Most are invisible, implicit, yet they carry our lives
and actions and are the core foundations upon which we base our judgments, decisions, and
actions. Values are the hanger that supports the garment, the invisible compass that directs our
lives, they are (as I say to my students) the ‘glasses through which we see the world’. The
problem is, however, that values are omnipresent yet obscure. Their insidious nature is due, I
think, to the fact that values tend to cloak themselves in elusive concepts like “reality” and
“common sense” and descriptors like “Aiming for excellence”. Values that do, however, invest
these terms with meaning lurk below the surface, and to coax them out is treacherous. Even when
they pretend to be explicit, they rarely are.

3.1 Values as invisible

To examine this, let’s look for a minute at a predictable yet simple example. For years now, the
media has been choking on discussions around Climate Change. What has emerged so far from
all this talk is a tendency toward one response: “Really doing something to address Climate
Change will cost too much.” This is presented by many as mere common sense. From some
perspectives, the math figures, quite frankly, prove the statement right. When we scratch below
the surface, however, we can see that this is only true if we base the reading of the situation on
certain values. If, for example, saving money, here and now (for me) is most important, climate change action is too costly. If, however, we widen the frame to include consideration of what we mean by cost, to whom, based on what, to what end, with what outcome, we would clearly argue that not acting will, in the end, be more expensive. But in order to end up with this second, contrasting, perspective, it is apparent that the values need to shift. Instead of the cost to a particular group of Canadians, or a particular government, in a particular province, we need to view the cost from the perspective of a planet. We need to see ourselves as connected. Two values - the first personal cost, the second collective cost - then emerge as the values which lead to the opposing assertions. Of course, it is when values are most invisible that, paradoxically, they assert the most powerful hold. If, based on the consideration of greater good, we argue that we cannot afford not to take climate change seriously, the implicit assertion is that we care less about individual gain or individual cost, and more about the impact at a greater level. The values that underpin our observations, assertions, and ultimately our actions, in either case, are evidenced outwardly in the actions that reflect what we care about.

3.2 Values and education

Educational policies, curricula, and the institutions themselves in terms of everyday practice is one of society’s most powerful tools for fostering and ensuring the transfer of values, attitudes, and practices. This is true not only of those which are oppressive and damaging as well as, conversely, those which contribute to promoting positive social change that leads to social justice and social health (Morris, 1994). The tremendous potential – constructive or destructive – that is embedded in our educational institutions, however, serves to heighten the urgency of our need to re-think the philosophical premises and foundational values that inform our educational practices (Scapp, 2003).
Values education, as we know, takes several forms (Osborne, 1999). The first, “values clarification” strives to equip students with the ability to sort out their personal values, recognizing their implications for everyday life. The second, “values analysis” teaches our students “to examine controversial social and political problems, to analyze the beliefs people have about them and to arrive at their own personal positions”. The third, an approach which emphasizes “moral reasoning” and “moral development” teaches students how to think about difficult problems of right and wrong, justice and fairness (Osborne, p. 61.) Of course, as Osborne points out, the one thing in common with all of these is that they do not teach what to think, but rather provide models for and practicing in sorting out how to think.

It is important to recognize that values are not separate from the personal aspects of human lives, those things which give form to what we do and how we go about doing it. In terms of education, we use our knowledge to create learning opportunities for our students, and they then bring their life experiences to the process of making meaning. The value assumptions that underpin this process are learned, and are then used in subsequent learning and knowing. Most educators, I think we would all agree, acknowledge at some level the fact that values are important in education. As Osborne argues:

However they are handled, values play an important part in schooling. We want schools to teach children to behave properly, though we might sometimes disagree about what that means. We want schools to teach the values of work, responsibility, respect for others, and respect for human rights in general. We should also want the schools to teach students how to explore controversial and sensitive value questions. Democracy demands no less. (p.61)

4. **Implications: Education for sustainable development**
Having briefly mapped out the role of values in education and, by extension, in democratic society itself, I’d like to move now to touch upon a series of three specific values that I think are crucial in individuals if we are to take up the challenge of preparing students to participate in a democratic society. These are: 1) courage b) responsibility, and c) reflection, response & interaction with the world.

4.1 Responsibility and courage

I’d like to take a minute to touch on the notion of courage, and linking this to the act of taking responsibility, since I think they’re critical to this discussion of critical arts education. In my work in social justice education I have found that artists – as educators in the broadest sense – often provide guidance in terms of how best to understand cutting edge, front line challenges in our lives. Referring in 1996 to the tragedy in Bosnia, American poet Christopher Merrill observed that “… we have largely shirked the responsibilities that go with our economic and military power…” (Merrill, 1996). He urged poets and writers to “write as citizens, not soldiers; as witnesses, not watchers.” I think that this distinction between witnesses and watchers is critical, in terms of what we need to work toward in education. According to Merrill, the difference between witnessing and watching is a function of the imagination. He argues that witnessing comes from the Old English for to know, whereas watching is related to waking as if from sleep. He explains that first we watch and then, if our imaginations are sufficiently engaged, we witness. I think that, perhaps we need to do both – watch, and then witness – and I wish nothing less for my students.

So in light of Merrill’s perspective, how can all this be pulled together? So far I have established that Who we think we are …. Makes a difference in how we see our roles as citizens. I have also argued that we need to be aware --- all of us ---- of the way in which specific values underpin judgments, decisions, and actions, and we need to know how to deconstruct our relationship to
these. We need to put up front the values that would rather lurk in the background of our words and actions, what I call the why behind the why. This is necessary in order for us to create “literate” citizens, who are able to de-common-sense the issues. Who are able to acknowledge that “common sense” isn’t necessarily so for all. Who have the courage to point things out, as in “it seems to me”…….

I think that courage provides the foundation for the overlapping cluster of other values that we might see as necessary in education for sustainability. In fact, the word courage comes from the same stem as the French word Coeur, meaning “heart” (May, The Courage to Create, p.4). As Rollo May points out, “Courage is not a virtue or value among other personal values like love or fidelity. It is the underpinning that underlies and gives reality to all other virtues and personal values. Without courage our love pales into mere dependency. Without courage our fidelity becomes conformism. (p.4) I would also argue that courage is a required element in our lives if these are to be characterized by autonomous, independent thinking... Courage is essential in order for there to be the kind of strong critical thinking involving judgments, as well as the creative imagining necessary for a socially just world.

5. Reflection, response & interaction with the world: Textual examples from teaching

I am never more keenly aware of the truth of this, as when I read my students words, as they struggle to find the courage to take responsibility, to ask questions of themselves and others, to talk back. I’d like to share here several brief examples of what I take to be glimmers of students showing courage, taking responsibility, and effectively thinking in ways that give me hope as an educator. First, it is clear that there is a powerful counter force working against courageous, independent thinking toward responsibility. As Alice wrote so poignantly in a paper for my course Teaching for Social Justice:

I feel that I take part in an ongoing battle everyday between what society wants and asks of me and what I want and ask of myself. I am consistently bombarded by media telling me that
I’m not thin enough, that I’m not pretty enough, that I don’t have the right clothing, etc. As well as school and family (I am) trying to set my life in a certain direction and I feel that none, or at least very little, of where I’m heading is of my own agency. It seems that the easy path to take is to just allow these forces to govern my life and follow the trajectory that they map out for me, but then I lose the very essence of my own being and compromise my aspirations and my truths in the process…” (original emphasis. This student’s words reflect the response of so many who struggle under the weight of their desire to take responsibility for their attitudes, decisions and actions, to live with courage.

At the risk of overloading this discussion with the words of others, I would like to share with you one extract from the journal portfolio of another student in the same course. “Karina worked her 10 hours of service work for her social justice volunteer position in Montreal at Right to Move, a communal bicycle repair and rebuilding shop, viewing this as she did as a site through which she could contribute to and learn about social justice in the environment. As Karina argued: I think riding my bike is living for a better world because it decreases air and noise pollution, it models a healthy lifestyle, it decreases the need for roads and pavement (hence increasing green space, its fast enough that I use it all the time (unlike walking) but slow enough that I see what’s going on in the street and feel more a part of my environment that I would in a car or bus.” (journal entry, March 15, 2002). Karina writes: “Sometimes one must take a stand for social justice like an urban cyclist approaches the road: without asking permission to be there, taking up the space one feels one deserves whether or not anyone else agrees, trying to occupy that space without offending anyone unnecessarily, and watching one’s back carefully to ensure no one else is going to take that space away from you. (journal entry, portfolio, March, 2002.)

In 2001, the democratic participatory class project for my 22 education students in my course “Arts and Resistance” was the 6 week long writing of a collective response to September 11th, in
the form of a poem. In a reflective assignment afterwards, Cecilia wrote of this Poetry Project: *I am glad that we were not instructed the way it was going to proceed. We all thought for ourselves and contributed ideas, to the rest of the class. It, in turn, gave us a sense of responsibility not only for ourselves but also for the direction our assignment was going in.* (October 18, 2001).

Another student, Sarita, observed the following: *For me the poem signifies and confirms that art can communicate so much with so little. It can heal, express, and provide different perspectives to a situation or event. I am impressed that this project, which was once confined, to our classroom has branched out into the Internet with a website demonstrating all the stages we have gone through to achieve the final copy. I am also amazed that the poem might be presented at a conference. It just comes to show what we can accomplish, and that our voices can be heard. I think that this point is the biggest life lesson that I have learned from this project. We are not insignificant in the world and that as citizens there are ways of voicing our opinions and making some changes.* (October 18, 2001).

What I think is, in effect, quite miraculous here is the evidence in the words of both students of the beginning steps necessary to “make(ing) visible, in unique and wonderful ways, what (dian marino) called the “hidden cracks in our consent” to oppression, steps toward “forging the often difficult but critical transition from consent to resistance” (Barndt et al., 1982; Marino, 1997). In these examples, we can see that - very often - once students start to think, the path to learning toward increased responsibility for self and other is one and the same.

6. **Re-imagining social justice learning through critical arts education**
As Canadian fiction writer Jane Rule so poignantly observed: “If it’s out there in the world, we’d better understand it”\(^1\). It is telling that it takes an incredible amount of energy to “teach against the grain”, to cultivate the how of thinking rather than the what, to work in ways that foster democratic values in which individuals see themselves as part of a much, much larger whole. We must care for and about public in a spirit similar to that which we bring to care of all things personal. They aren’t separate.

Within this framework Social Justice Education (and its counterpart, Socially Just Education), involves striving for the values, practices, and goals of transformative education: to teach with conscience, to be aware of and integrate the needs of diverse learning populations, to work for transformation toward a society characterized by equality and justice. Yet to take responsibility for teaching – and learning - with courage, with conscience, predictably and understandably, is demanding.

For many, the possibility for success in school and – unfortunately- in society in general, belongs to, "someone else". Increasingly, technology is hailed as not only the primary instrument and tool of education, but also (in light of so-called global imperatives) as an end goal, a motivational raison d'être for the educational endeavour itself. As genetics and genomes, robotics and nanotechnology, Bill Gates, myspace and blogs inhabit daily conversations with ever-increasing frequency, the threat and promise of a future dominated by the technologically skilled has resulted in the wide-spread call for "computers in every classroom". Correspondingly, many educational policy makers are accelerating their "back to basics" thrust, favouring the acquisition of very specific skills, with technology at the core, since many perceive the primary role of education to be the preparation of students to "compete" in a vicious global economy where technology rules.

\(^1\) *Fiction and other truths: A film about Jane Rule* (National Film Board of Canada)
In light of the limited resources available in education, this shift necessarily occurs at the expense of other educational activities. Unfortunately, the disciplines which suffer cuts are often the ones which, reflect a very different view of the end goal of the educational endeavour. An example of this is the decisive movement away from Education in the Arts. In the latest issue, for example, of the International Journal of Education through Art the editor notes the argument by K. Freedman that global fiscal imperatives and “businessization” are changing educational policies such that these are limiting students’ and teachers’ creativity and imagination. (p. 5) Paradoxically the arts are an ideal forum in which to foster students' qualities of critical awareness, creativity and invention, human self-knowledge, self-esteem, in-depth understanding of societal issues, responsible citizenship, and moral integrity. These qualities, we all agree, are the very qualities that need to be developed in education if it is to meet the much broader and deeper goal of social justice.

The main point, then, is captured in the words of Charles Fowler: We don’t need more and better arts education to develop more and better artists. We need more and better arts education to produce better human beings, citizens who will value and evolve a worthy civilization. This captures the arts as a site of learning with the potential to foster personal and collective growth, dialogue, social awareness, and the building of community. In my experience, the arts has shown students provide an opportunity for the challenging of pre-suppositions, leading to the construction of new knowledge and the cultivation of awareness of self and other at a personal, aesthetic, socio-political, and historical level. Moreover, such meaning-making is enhanced when it integrates the individual's personal narrative, embedded in the individual's gender, language, beliefs, culture, and life history. This understanding of arts education takes a broad perspective, like that afforded by one who looks out to sea and is met with the wisdom of a panoramic vista,
of a broader picture. It is interesting to note that, as far back as 1995, the Quebec Government wrote the following in a policy paper:

“An awakening to creativity is an essential dimension of any life learning and all education. The emphasis on sciences and technology tends to lead us to forget an unchallengeable reality: the formative value of the arts. (...) Moreover, access to arts and culture necessarily depends upon arts and cultural education. As such, art must find itself at the very heart of the educational endeavor (...) ² this was a very significant statement to be issued at that time by the provincial government of Quebec.

Viewing arts education from within the context of social awareness comes only when we remind ourselves that the "what" of education matters only when considered within the context of far more challenging questions concerning the "why", the role of education and how it relates to lives. What purpose, for example, do we assign to arts education: what do we want it to do? What can we risk to let it do? Can we afford not to? Are we courageous enough to work toward the formation of individuals who take responsibility for making meaning in their own lives, or will we choose rather to distance ourselves from art making, and art-"living", perpetuating and reflecting the erosion of our society's ability to make sense of itself in terms of its own values and creative expression?

² / L'éveil à la créativité est une dimension essentielle de tout apprentissage à la vie et de toute éducation. L'engouement pour les sciences et les nouvelles technologies a tendance à faire oublier une réalité indiscutable: la valeur formatrice des arts (...). De plus, l'accès aux arts et à la culture passe nécessairement par l'éducation aux arts et à la culture. Aussi, l'art doit-il se retrouver au cœur même du projet éducatif (...).
5. Conclusion

Students need to value themselves if they are going to value others and their planet. Connected to that: self esteem is necessary if they are going to be able to take a moral stand. I think that in education, one of the most important responsibilities we have is to place emphasis on valuing individuals, on creating environments that are not harmful to them, on cultivating learning places where children, youth, or adult students feel safe and ready to take risks. Unfortunately, awareness and concern for self-esteem is one of the key elements missing from many educational environments. The impact of this - regardless of whether it is experienced as personal despair that manifests in withdrawal and/or lower achievement, or whether it reveals itself as aggressive, deviant behaviour - is devastating to the individual and, increasingly, to those around them, leading to such social problems as increasing levels of suicide, aggression against classmates, and societal violence among youths, with disastrous results, personally and socially. I think that strongly fostering a healthy self-esteem in students, in addition to the obvious benefits to their well-being, is an important way of addressing problems related to deviant behaviour and aggression. Unfortunately, if we don’t understand this, we will do harm. Some theorists have written about the way in which schools can unintentionally foster - rather than work to alleviate - hopelessness in minority youth. Many theorists argue that while on the one hand we teach children to reach for dreams that are big, we spend much time in school teaching them what they cannot do. Jerome Bruner argues that (Bruner, 1996) “Education is risky, for it fuels the sense of possibility. But a failure to equip minds with the skills for understanding and feeling and acting in the cultural world is not simply scoring a pedagogical zero. It risks creating alienation, defiance, and practical incompetence. And all of these undermine the viability of a culture.” P 42-43).

In order to prepare students for a healthy participation in democratic life, individuals must have experienced an education in which they were valued, one which - in addition to providing
knowledge and training in skills - also leaves them with their self confidence intact. Canadian activist June Callwood believes that:

Motivation comes from confidence, kindness comes from confidence. It just means that you feel okay about yourself and you have something left over to give. And until we raise a generation of kids who haven’t been abused and who haven’t been belittled, haven’t been neglected and haven’t been under-stimulated, we are not going to have enough people who have a surplus of goodwill to stop and interfere with injustice.

(Nathani, 1998)

When self-esteem is taken away from students, based solely on difference as a result of others' biases, prejudices, insecurities and fears, then education will fail us, our youth, and society as a whole. Most importantly, it will fail itself. Not only is valuing students, providing an educational environment in which they learn to be true to themselves, to value themselves, and to possess this "stronger, more inner sense of linkage" a way of educating for possibility at the individual level, it is also, in my view, essential to laying the foundation for possibility at the community, national, and global levels.

The kind of teaching I am talking about is not easy, however. As traditional institutions like family, church, and community are challenged in contemporary society, emphasis is placed on the need for schools - and by extension teachers - to assume more and more of the responsibilities for young peoples' growth and well-being at many levels. They have to give greatly, and teach with conscience, an immeasurable challenge, given the force with which so many competing influences impact them each day.

Teaching with conscience demands tremendous stamina. It is undeniably easier to teach with the grain than against it. It is easier to implement "Zero Tolerance Policies" and expel problems, transferring them to someone else's jurisdiction, than it is to work at understanding and
addressing the complex underlying issues that led to the problem in the first place. As all teachers know, it is far more demanding to teach children than to teach lessons. It is far easier to assume that the learning is over when the teaching is finished. And it is much less complex to reassure ourselves that if students know how to operate computers, if they use them with ease at school, then the educational institutions have fulfilled their social responsibilities. But for those teachers for whom short-term goals and band-aid solutions are not sufficient, for those who strive to teach for possibility and social justice, whose aim is to conscientiously and tirelessly strive to address youths' development at a deeper, more holistic level, and for the longer term, the challenge of teaching is great and very demanding. The teacher needs to be a learner, in Paolo Freire’s words (Freire, 1972).

The educator concerned with “transformative” teaching is required to be self-reflective, and to systematically revisit critical questions: What does it mean for me to know? How is my own knowledge constructed? Based on what authority? Are there different kinds of knowledge, and if so, how are these characterized? What does it mean to learn? What are the characteristics of those situations that have, in the past, most effectively fostered positive learning experiences for me? Are these conditions present in my school, in my classroom? What are the forces that serve to mediate against learners in schools? Are my teaching practices and/or attitudes part of these? What can I do to make positive changes? What does it mean to teach and what kind of "teacher" do I strive to be? And finally, to what end? What is the final goal of the educational process in which I am engaged?

Do we perpetuate a system of exclusion by speaking, through our teaching, implicitly and primarily to those who know, who conform, who succeed, and do we as such tighten points of entry into privileged society for those who don't? How willing are we to move from our own personal centres into the world of the other, in recognition of their point of departure, their
potential, professionally as well as inter-personally. Do we re-think our assumptions about whose voice matters? And finally, In what ways do the responses to these questions impact my teaching?

In closing, I’ll turn to the words of Glenn Gould. This Canadian pianist believed that “(...) counterpoint – the standard form of fugue - is (...) a method of composition in which, if all goes well, each individual voice lives a life of its own” (Gould, Roberts, & Guertin, 1992). "Like the voices of dynamic participants in democracy and in transformative education, Gould’s voice "living a life of its own" is a dialogical voice, in community, enriched by response, growing through the exchange. Like in Gould’s fugue, our contemporary society is diminished each time a voice is denied the opportunity (or the right) to respond. I think that the arts help develop that voice, to be used we hope for the things that make our planet happier, healthier, and more just. The arts evoke the use of our many ways of knowing, help us connect the parts of the self, and strengthen the tools needed to reconcile the needs of self and society. They give the gift of possibility.

To come back to part two of my Rocky and Bullwinkle title, I’d like to close by revisiting that second question: Just Who Should Our Students Think They Are? In my view, they should be individuals who will think critically, who will question, who will interact with courage. They will be individuals who will take responsibility. Who will have empathy. In the current global context in which we live, the educational mandate is more and more strident: We need to cultivate - through the values that we foster - citizens who are connected, who see that what’s harmful to one is harmful to all. People who dare. Who have the courage to say out loud: “It seems to me that……” We need to work to foster future citizens who confidently know that they
can have a positive impact in the world and, more importantly, who know this because they first believe that they have the right to try.
References


