

What Can Covid Teach Us? An Essay

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This essay opens with an assertion in the first person. I choose to open this way as this paper is a personal statement on how I see Covid-19 (henceforth Covid) impacting on educational delivery, and also on what I call the ‘pedagogical imagination’. The paper comes at a time when many lines of intellectual, cultural and personal inquiry are converging on a reading of the world, technology, education, consciousness and human action as coterminous in and across space and time. Such convergence is captured in Figure 1 below, and reminds us that the linear, temporal compass of modernity is exclusive, violent and totally inadequate when the world, and its viral messenger Covid, comes knocking on the doors of our luxurious but fragile mansion. This is an exciting, challenging and potentially overwhelming moment in human self-understanding. Now to the assertion.

Human beings are pattern makers. In turn, culture is the cumulative result of generations of such patterning. Patterning enables meaning which is narrative in nature and contains the logics that hold the world, any given reality, together. Understanding this helps me see our world and the role of education in it as a process of ongoing meaning making. Patterning is meaning making in this case. We can see that this patterning is linked to our agency (or lack thereof) and the way in which technology has enabled us to generate and even impose patterns that confirm our pattern biases as both collectives and individuals. In

the language of Yuval Harari these patterns sustain ‘imagined orders’ (2015). Or, if we go back some years, they are complicit in the ‘imagined communities’ of national identity that Benedict Anderson identified (1983). Patterning is at the heart of myth, science, education, religion, cities, institutions and most certainly, our understanding of nature. We give it voice and form in curriculum and the educational domains this fascinating *bête-noire* speaks to. Pinar et al. (2000) map the tribes of curricular association, the pattern groupings I am thinking of, in their magnum opus *Understanding Curriculum*. The dynamic associations and qualities of patterning bring to mind Foucault’s potent phrase ‘dangerous coagulations’ that Bernadette Baker and her colleagues spoke to in their thinking about education (Baker & Heyning, 2004).

Inter-Being

The point of the above assertion and its set of clauses is that when thinking about what Covid can teach us, it is not enough to look to the technocratic system responses to the pandemic. That is getting copious attention but for me, it misses the point of what we can learn as educators about how formal education – pedagogy in particular – is entering a whole new territory. The territory of what Charles Eisenstein, drawing on the Buddhist monk and scholar Thich Nhat Hanh, has called ‘inter-being’ (Eisenstein, 2018; Hạnh, 1988). Covid has an immediacy that climate change, a deeper symptom of this ‘inter-being’, has not been able to convey. Technocratic patterning is, of course, increasing its hold on the human imagination and is certainly offering a way forward but not challenging the root cause of the Covid dilemma. It is side-stepping the fact that despite technology’s capacity to facilitate ‘inter-being’, as in the relational processes of life, it remains a prisoner of the linear and reductionist worldview that has led to a break down in relational awareness (Mozzini-Alister & Mayo, 2021).

Covid challenges us as educators to think, see, imagine beyond the given boundaries of discipline and short term, managerialist institutional priorities which lack an integrated futures perspective. Following Baker, who challenges education's enslavement by the nation state, we need to accept that:

Education's strategies and issues spring from beyond the bounded territoriality of each specific nation-state while the advent of new and irreducible cultural sources of subjectivity especially for children and youth and urgent problems such as eco-disaster produce notions of belonging and responsibility that may include, exceed, and/or reject the symbolic work of union that flag and anthem were thought to achieve. (2009, p. 25)

This 'symbolic work', the work of imagination and association within the cage of a specified given nationalist, technocratic and functional identity is what Covid challenges. This point brings me back to the patterning work of culture and its pedagogic implications. Covid invites thinking about the implications of 'inter-being', the patterning processes that lay bare the layered and interwoven nature of reality. This invitation, for many, has been a 'poison chalice' as evidenced by the rebellions against masks, vaccines, lockdowns and border closures. Yet all such restrictions speak to the recognition that viruses are contagious; that they do not respect borders and furthermore that they creatively 'hack' systems – both natural and social – to leverage their reach. Yet behind this capacity of the virus to hack systems lies the arena of moral and ethical consciousness. The pedagogical implications of this consciousness have been little explored.

Re-Balancing

Covid, as a perfect storm, lays bare the embeddedness of humanity in a dynamic and relational universe. To teach to such a realisation, to follow its epistemological and ontological logic brings into play the pedagogical imagination. The implications are many but clearly,

this points to the end of a dominant pattern. Using the conceptual framework offered by Eisenstein we can see that Covid ends one hegemonic story whilst spawning a range of new narratives. As hard as it may seem, Covid invites us to love more and embrace a new mythos, that of inter-being. Eisenstein frames it this way:

A shift in mythology is more than a cognitive shift... The name I like to use for the new story is Thich Nhat Hanh's term 'interbeing'... Interbeing must be more than a philosophical concept if anything is going to change. It must be a way of seeing, a way of being, a strategic principle, and most of all a felt reality... When we restore the internal ecosystem, the fullness of our capacity to feel and to love, only then will there be hope of restoring the outer... the ecological crisis is asking for a revolution of love. (2018, pp. 9-11)

What Eisenstein is speaking to here is a re-balancing of relationship. Pedagogically, this re-balancing takes the form of trans-disciplinarity as a way of furthering a new vision of human presence and action on a planet under stress. Yet it is more than this. It involves a new way of encountering the new, the uncertain and the unknown. The dominant default in such cases is fear. But what if it were love? The 'love' Eisenstein is speaking to is both strategic and felt. To love means to step into relationship. To educate for this is what I have called, following the Indian philosopher Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar (1982), Neohumanism (Bussey, 2000, 2006, 2010). Just as Humanism offered a new 'map' for humanity emerging from the Medieval period, I see Neohumanism offering a new 'map' for a humanity no longer standing in isolation or opposition to the Cosmos. Covid has triggered a 'Neohumanist moment' which has long been brewing as the world descends into climate and existential crisis. Covid challenges business as usual and the cultural practices that continue to destroy the natural infrastructure that supports our amazing civilisation. In short, it invites a rethinking of the

possibilities of relationship, the neohumanistic consciousness of the possibilities inherent in the subject's correspondence with the cosmos (Sarkar, 1997).

De-centred Ego!

This emergent awareness begins a rapid dissolution of ego-centredness—this “creative destruction” Peter Senge et al. point out is a symptom of our time of flux and change (2004, p. 84). Richard Tarnas explains that this awareness senses a ‘synthetic correspondence’ of micro with macro in which:

the universe [is recognized as] a fundamentally and irreducibly interconnected whole, informed by creative intelligence and pervaded by patterns of meaning and order that extend through every level, and that are expressed through a constant correspondence between astronomical events and human events. (2006, p. 77)

Furthermore, this folded awareness creates a new ethical field of critical action where:

The self and world are inescapably interconnected. The self doesn't react to a reality outside, nor does it create something new in isolation—rather, like the seed of a tree, it becomes the gateway for the coming into being of a new world. (Senge, 2004, p. 92)

This in turn invites a new critical relationship to knowledge, knowledge production and education. Critique in this context is rich, and relational. Drawing on deep traditions of resistance and creative inversion it is also spiritual (Bussey, 2006; Giri, 2016). It aims to free us a little more each day from the powerful forces that frame and valorise any given ‘real’ (Foucault, 2002). This is key to understanding what we can learn from Covid. Firstly, we must take on board that our education system to date has been about mastery and control over our human subjectivities. Secondly, this biopolitical drive has distorted our relationship to curiosity and the world around us leading us to conflate learning with information management. Thirdly, the end result is that education has been impoverished as control fails

to understand love and the relational. So, this brings us to the insight so eloquently framed by Stefanie Fishel that:

The planet demands more from us than the unexamined ideas of human mastery over nature that shut out other kinds of relations with both ourselves and other beings.

(2017, p. 1)

Covid as Angel of History

Covid can thus be reframed as a messenger from planet Earth! In a sense, turning Walter Benjamin on his head (1969, p. 257), Covid is the revitalised face of the ‘angel of history’¹! In the guise of both angel and storm from paradise (yes, I am mixing metaphors), Covid invites us to think of education as a relational process that ‘awakens the dead’, shaking up our pedagogical imaginations and turning our eyes from the ‘wreckage’ of the past, to futures beyond what Phoebe Tickell and her colleagues, who penned the ‘Moral Imaginations Manifesto’², term the ‘great flattening’. This invites that critical consciousness that is aware of relationship, the relational as a theoretical and applied source of inspiration and also ‘education on behalf’ of futures to come. Such visions of futures to come are immanent to our present (Bussey, 2009), yet suppressed by the dominant technocratic hegemonic discourse (Milojević, 2005). Yet, if we listen to the Angel amongst us, we will be able, as Benjamin notes, to grasp “the constellation which [our] own era has formed with a definite earlier one” (1969, p.263).

¹ See Benjamin: “This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress” Page 257.

² See <https://medium.com/moral-imaginations/a-manifesto-for-moral-imagination-dbf62f0cb7aa>

This folded temporal quality is important to embrace, as the present is not a singular, nor are our pasts and futures. Acting on this we become creative traditionalist who take what enables from our pasts and cast these elements, reframed in our presents into the futures we seek to enable. This understanding I have termed, ‘creative traditionalism’ – the crafting/surfacing of new narratives from traditions that have preceded our current presents (Bussey, 2015, 2021). Drawing on the work of Cornel West, we can find in traditions elements that can enable new futures (1999, p. 171). Figure 1 captures this process through the metaphor of the Worm Ouroboros.

Figure 1.

Folded Time



There is a constant messaging across all three spaces: pasts, presents and futures. The indigenous worldview has at its heart an awareness of this messaging (Harjo, 2019; Yunkaporta, 2019). This temporal insight in turn, invites (that word again) a new epistemology of presence. The sense of temporal simultaneity that John and Angela Lederach speak to (2010, p. 9). One in which ‘waiting’ makes as much sense as ‘doing’. Monica Gagliano sums this insight up beautifully:

I thought I had been waiting for something to happen, and instead I was learning to wait without waiting... as we relaxed in the belly of the unknown and handed ourselves over to life, what if we discovered a surprising clarity to see what is truly happening and what needs to be done? By dropping our obsession for controlling life, the whole fiction about 'being unsafe' drops too. (2018, p. 85; 87)

This new epistemology of presence also reconfigures agency and the curriculum that fosters it. In this space the singular becomes multiple as times past, present and future contain the multiple, allowing as Sawyer and Norris note, for "a curriculum of the self, a pedagogy of subjectivity" (2021, p. x) that is not closed but shaped via engagement with the many voices, the human, non-human and viral, that share this extended field. Here the 'Angel Covid' stands as a teacher, challenging us laggard students to actually do the learning that matters, the learning to love that relationship demands. This is a new patterning of awareness that has been present all along, as noted above, but suppressed.

Education on Behalf Of...

When we engage with folded time, the educational terrain shifts. Education is no longer banking for a singular future, that old pattern, it is dancing with multiple futures: engaging fractal futures; linking patterning to preferred futures. This linking involves creative engagement with our pasts and a return to the present as a folded space in which both pasts and futures interact. To teach on behalf of, is to teach in an open space when knowledges rub up against one another, where the provisional, uncertain and opaque become elements in the drive to learn. Thus, a pedagogy of presence invites in enabling traditions, but is not prisoner of them. It involves what Cynthia Dillard terms (re)membering (2012). To (re)member is to act on behalf of, teach on behalf of past and future generations that include not just the marginalised human antecedents/descendants but also the more than human that Timothy Morton embraces (2017). Dillard makes it explicit that this is a form of spiritual work.

Locating her work in the liberative struggle to reclaim and (re)member African American agency she speaks to both the diasporic and marginalised wounds of past generations. She also speaks to and on behalf of those to come. She clearly recognises that such (re)membering entails an embracing of folded time:

For many researchers of color, embracing an ethic that opens to spirit is fundamental to the nature of learning, teaching, and by extension, research...And if we assume as I do that the knowledge, wisdom, and ways of our ancestors are a central and present part of everything that has existed, is existing, and will exist in what we call the future, then teaching and research must also undertake an often unnamed, unrecognized, unarticulated and forgotten task that is important for individuals who yearn to understand ways of being and knowing that have been marginalized in the world and in formal education. Simply put, we must learn to (re)member the things that we've learned to forget. (2012, p.4)

Covid is here to open up spaces for enacting the 'often unnamed, unrecognized, unarticulated and forgotten task' of education on behalf of the marginalised. This means reaffirming tradition, allowing rather than enforcing learning and doing the inner work that new patterning calls for. This inner work is essential! One of the things about presence is that we must be able to be still, to sit with, share and contemplate. I of course, am stretching Dillard's intention to include as presencing with the planet and all of humankind, as Morton understands this state (2017).

Conclusion

The educational environment has been reeling from the impact of Covid, and technologies have certainly been a godsend but should not be thought of as the 'silver bullet'. Nor should they be used as a means of surveillance and social control (Giroux, 2021). What we can learn from Covid is that control is illusory. Relationship on the other hand is 'easy'.

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Thus, we need to find new ways to educate, to pattern curriculum that is meaningful and open ended. The inner work of course is needed, but we also need to forge new systems within which learning becomes a calling forth, a liberating process. Covid can sound the death knell for a system of educating that has failed to address the relational and maintained the illusion that the world of knowledge is a world ‘out there’ and that we are knowing subjects divorced from the known. Here I am imagining intimate futures that call forth an intimate relationship with the known (Bussey, 2020). Such a vision is worth striving for. Love, as bell hooks reminds us, is what ‘enhances life’s joy’ (2001, p. 140). Certainly, this is worth educating for. Covid indeed has made this patently clear. The virus has been teaching us to rethink our priorities. I hope we will listen and find collective pathways to futures beyond fear and insecurity. These things do not serve us.

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I have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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