Book review. Seal, M. (Ed) (2021). Hopeful Pedagogies in Higher Education, London, UK: Bloomsbury.

Anna Mihaylov[A]

[A]   Academic Director- Analytics, Accounting and Finance, Kaplan Business School, Australia

"It is not possible to be unfinished beings, such as we are, conscious of that inconclusiveness, and not seek. Education is precisely that seeking movement, that permanent search." (Paulo Freire)

Imagine you have been invited to a conference where only the themes are pre-determined. Each participant submits a revealing and authentic video at the outset, uncovering beneath institutional norms real character, humour and interests. To challenge the power imbalances between academics, support staff and students, roles are omitted from name badges, and session leaders are drawn from each stratum. Every morning an agenda is determined using open, collaborative dialogue. Participants move between sessions at will, and the discussion is open and flowing. In this setting, everyone is forced to re-evaluate their understanding of "knowledge creation and who is leading", becoming one who is taught "in dialogue with others" (p. 209). This conference is run by Newman University in Birmingham, an institution employing critical pedagogy to pursue "social justice and equality of opportunity". Those involved in it later comment on the realisation that everyone was working towards a communal goal and could "think, learn and play" together in vulnerable and open pedagogical spaces. Should our classrooms similarly be open, democratic spaces where knowledge is co-constructed?

This enquiry resonates strongly with me as a mid-career academic manager, specifically the niggling but insistent question about whether my efforts are being invested in producing students who are:

1) Docile listeners focused on replicating existing politics, beliefs and structures; or

2) Critical global thinkers contributing to much needed social and political change

If you have a desire to confront this question, *Hopeful Pedagogies in Higher Education*, edited by Mike Seal and co-written and critiqued by over forty representatives from the UK higher education sector, is a useful book to kick off the process. It may feel unpleasant to start to question the things that underpin your views of teaching. However, if we do not venture into this uncomfortable, vulnerable and

destabilising space, neither will our students.

The higher education mandate

Let us begin with what our institutions of learning are meant to do in society and, by implication, what we are, as educators, tasked with doing. What is the "contractual relationship between universities and students" (p. 151)? What is the goal of education: discovery and transformation or career outcome? This book explores these questions with reference to real educator experiences.

The neoliberal frame suggests that career, social mobility and positive consumer engagement are the ultimate aims of higher education. This is critiqued by the book, which posits that while education as individual "achievement ... wealth, confidence and social mobility" is enticing, it conditions students "to accept the world as it is" (p. 151). In this world, it is "OK if more children are living in poverty, food banks are booming, racism is growing and the planet is overheating as long as I get a qualification and a small chance to climb imperceptibly up the economic ladder" (p. 151).

Critical pedagogy, as an offshoot of critical theory, challenges this "ideology of success" (p. 151) and aspires for learning to be a transformative experience which creates responsible global citizens, who question outdated homogenies and take action to create a more humane future. Based on the work of Paulo Freire and others, this book defines education as a "moment-to-moment actualisation and authenticity rather than aspiration and striving" (p. 153). Thus, under critical pedagogy, the education contract becomes a commitment to a holistic, playful experience where students bring their own internal experience to a flexible curriculum in which they are intellectual apprentices, not just learners. Reading student testimonials about critical pedagogy's co-creative learning spaces at Newman University brings this to life. In their foundation year, their students are given "more freedom" to dictate a generative curriculum. This allows them to "express [their] views and experience" as well as "critical opinions" (p. 93), to be "more collaborative and less competitive", opens them up to others' experiences and makes them feel like their "interests can be put into action" (p. 102). Hearing these voices makes an educator question

how often they allow their students to do the same. As observed by Liz Thomas in Chapter 10, "the higher education sector currently finds itself in a curious place, driven by market forces, but drawing on more radical pedagogies to meet student needs" (p. 127).

What is critical pedagogy?

This book defines critical pedagogy as giving students "the tools to undo, rethink and challenge their received wisdoms about what constitutes knowledge and education" (p. 17). It starts with the premise that education is not a politically neutral activity and can perpetuate or challenge existing power structures.

Critical pedagogy is presented as having three core elements: a dialogical approach to learning where "people think together and keep questions open" (p. 132), an authentic connection between learner and pedagogue and a flexible curriculum which incorporates student experiences and voices in its design. Students thus become "critical investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (p. 91).

This approach draws on Paulo Freire's work which challenges the assumption that the existing world order is "natural and inevitable (p. 1). He argues that education should be transformative and co-constructed, happening in spaces which encourage an "inquiring stance, open mindedness, curiosity, humility, an ethical and political commitment and an awareness of oneself as unfinished and living with and embracing uncertainty" (p. 157). All values rarely emphasised in graduate outcomes. Part of critical pedagogy is also identifying "dehumanising ideologies, technologies, institutions and orthodoxies". In addition, Chapter 13 makes a beautiful connection between these dispositions and the "beginners mind" explored by secular mindfulness (p. 157); a theoretical alignment which is refreshing to see. Critical pedagogy is also about rejecting measurable outcomes and pre-determined answers unsuited for the "multi-faceted nature of our increasingly complex societies" (p. 171).

Book structure and scope

Hopeful Pedagogies is a collection of reflections about integrating critical pedagogy into a neoliberal higher education framework. The core question it asks is whether the goal of education is primarily about:

1) Personal and social transformation; or

2) Social mobility and career outcomes

The book argues that the former is the main goal and can be achieved through a co-constructed critical enquiry rather than an "education of answers" (p. 65). It encourages educators to "dance in the cracks" of higher education bureaucracy and find small spaces where they can incorporate it into their practice.

The structure is a conversation among like-minded "hopeful" academic professionals, with contributions from almost 40 educators across the UK academic landscape. In line with a critical approach, every chapter is followed by a critical response from another academic professional. The structure of the book can be loosely summarised below:

- **Critical pedagogy**: Chapters 1-4 introduce critical pedagogy and its roots in critical theory.

- **Pedagogy of partnership**: Chapter 5 explores what is at the core of a more human and transformative interaction with students: the pedagogy of partnership.

- **Student experience of critical pedagogy**: Chapters 7, 8 and 12 provide a wonderful platform for students to talk about experiencing critical pedagogy at Newman University.

- **Implementation and teacher perspective**: Chapter 9 considers how curriculum can be broadened based on cultural artefacts, while Chapter 10 contains personal reflections of pedagogues about implementing a critical pedagogy which is always "constantly dissolving, diffusing and recreating" (p. 123).

- **The learning contract**: Chapters 13 to 20 explore becoming a hopeful pedagogue through the lens of psychology, mindfulness, emotions and student disability and disadvantage.

Authentic relationships as a vessel for critical pedagogy

So, what kind of pedagogical approaches empower students to elicit from themselves and articulate the world they want? This book, I believe rightly, suggests that it is through authentic relationships, democratic discourse and genuine human interaction. Specifically, through welcoming and including students as "equal members of the academic community" (p. 126) and guiding them through the uncomfortable passage of articulating their truth, learning about and interrogating existing power structures.

The book proposes a theoretical frame of the pedagogy of partnership to achieve this. It assumes that education "is always social" and that "trust and mutual respect make meaningful education possible" (p. 63). Inspiration for this framework is drawn from the *National Union of Students, Manifesto for Partnership (2012)* in the UK, which is a student-led proposal of an alternative to marketized higher education that "seeks to limit education to technological practice" as per Freire (p. 60).

The elements of this pedagogy are laid out in Chapter 5 and focus on collectively imagining ways to improve the world in a shared classroom space where instructors relinquish control and employ respectful dialogue, co-investigation and co-construction of knowledge. Thus, students and teachers can collectively challenge the current status quo and discover that education is a permanent search and a process of ongoing transformation.

Students as human beings

In order to establish a student-teacher intellectual partnership, Peter Sharpe identifies some barriers in Chapter 16 that we need to overcome. Firstly, the deficit model which implies that the university is responsible for overcoming student shortcomings, without considering their personal circumstances and contributions. Secondly, the colonisation of terms like engagement which have a tendency to objectify individual students in line with attrition and retention statistics, assuming that their "lived experience" is "left at the university door" (p. 181).

To overcome this alienation, a suggestion is made to re-orientate from a market ideology for student retention and engagement to "pedagogical love" espoused by Freire as a "commitment to others" (p. 183). This is about seeing, knowing and valuing students beyond our commercial contract with them.

But can we really reframe interaction with students into a "loving, human encounter" given the resource restrictions and marketized frame we operate under? The student reflections provided in Chapters 7, 8, 11 and 12 suggest to me that we should. Students from Newman University, many from disadvantaged backgrounds, permeate these chapters with their perspectives of overcoming "low self-worth" as someone coming into university with a "deficit" to be rectified and finding that "I could tell people my story… [and feel]… cared about" (p. 94). These students, some of whom are the first in their family to go to university, say that "relationships helped me change my view of uni" (p. 141), and the experience of being allowed to lead their own tutorial groups, design their own assessments and learning experience led to "learning without realising I was learning". Students spoke about deconstructing power structures and realising that they had their own valid theories about the world. Rather than being "remedied to fit into an academic environment", they are listened to and given power and autonomy (p. 147). As discussed in Chapter 14, seeing both the teacher and student as "thinking, feeling beings" can help them uncover their biases and subjectivities to promote truly critical dialogues (p. 163).

Who am I as an educator?

This brings us back to the initial question around our role as educators. What is my role as an educator and what goals am I aiming to achieve for my students? If you believe the goal of student transformation is a worthwhile one, the book suggests two main areas through which you can interrogate and evolve your practice.

First, we can ask whether we are transformative, critical, accommodating or hegemonic intellectuals (p. 40). A transformative intellectual makes "learning relevant to students" so that they can perceive themselves as "social actors", whereas critical intellectuals interrogate social structures but stop short of action. Accommodating and hegemonic intellectuals "perpetuate the status quo" whether consciously or otherwise. As the book points out, in a world where "market mechanisms will not provide what we need to stimulate the economy or address climate change" (p. 239), we need "critical innovative thinkers" to achieve "economic, ecological and social justice" for the time when the current systems falter or fail. What type of intellectual are you? How often do you confront uncomfortable realities in your classroom? Moreover, how often do you empower students to act on them?

Second, we can reflect on the nature of our interaction with students. Do we treat students as partners and producers of knowledge or as objects to be filled up? How do we balance this with the consumer relationship where we can be prone to overlook their humanness? And finally, how do we avoid projecting our own need for "self-esteem", "peer recognition" or escaping feelings of rejection or inferiority" (p. 167) onto our students? This is really a re-conceptualisation of the power dynamics between student and teacher, gearing towards learning becoming a "reciprocal and collaborative process" (p. 195), rather than one where you feel good about delivering an engaging lecture. If we do not confront our own psychologies and consider those of our students perhaps true "co-creation" of knowledge is out of our reach. Sections of the book show that this approach is particularly effective for marginalised students, by including them as "equal members of the academic community" (p. 126) to guide them through "the angst of deep learning" (p. 54).

Critique

This book is exemplary in bringing crucial pedagogical and social issues to the fore. The main suggestions are around execution, as I believe that it creates barriers against readers being able to practically apply critical pedagogies in their classrooms. These should be addressed if it is to appeal to a wider segment of the academic community.

Firstly, the structure is convoluted, and the cumbersome chapter names often do not reflect the crux of the discussion contained therein. For example, Chapter 9 is called "Academic Identities", but focuses on broadening the curriculum. The chapters which showcase applications of critical theory are lost among theoretical discussions. The reader is often forced to dig through the content and constantly re-orient themselves as the chapters do not logically flow on from one another.

Secondly, the strongest parts of the book centre around pedagogues' and students' reflections on experiencing critical pedagogy. This focus on practical application and experience makes the reader keenly feel the commodification of education and what it could be if given the chance. However, the book does not give enough outlets for this inner tension to be mobilised into action. It talks about "praxis" but, I believe, doesn't provide enough examples of critical pedagogy in action, especially with reference to different disciplines. Insights from pedagogues from different disciplines would help elucidate how to apply this paradigm to areas which may be more technical or cluttered with theory. The book talks about "dancing in the cracks" but provides too few concrete examples. I could not put down Chapter 19 which described the mechanics of the conference modelled on critical pedagogy principles or the

chapters about Newman's foundational years and wanted more of this when I finished.

Finally, some of the vocabulary and discussion assume that the reader is already a critic of neoliberalism without pointing out its flaws. For many readers, the failure of neoliberalism may not be a foregone conclusion, and respect needs to be paid for their views. Living in a privileged educated class, one may believe that the current system has many redeeming qualities and that social mobility alone is a noble aspiration for their students.

The reason for bringing up these shortcomings is that this book would have mass appeal were it simplified and made more practical, accessible and applicable to broader academic fields. It would then be able to address more directly the bubbling disquiet within educators that they are not adequately preparing their students for a changing world. A world students can have a part in transforming.