# Learning to Teach, Teaching to Learn:
# Educating for Self-Realization, Social Inquiry
# and Civic Contribution in Times of Crisis

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## Abstract

*In times of deep crisis, the most powerful critical contemplative pedagogy available to us is that of supporting all children and youth in learning to teach and teaching to learn as a primary path toward self-realization, social inquiry and civic contribution. This vital opportunity should be made accessible to all students, regardless of perceived academic ability, especially to those whose access to voice and to power is limited.*

*In this essay integrating critical, progressive, contemplative and holistic perspectives across time and cultures, I trace the development of a transformative educational philosophy that I will refer to as politically engaged holism. Consistent with this guiding vision, the spiritual dimension of learning and life is acknowledged and fully engaged with careful attention to equity and inclusion. Higher order learning skills promoted via established curricular mandates are expanded to promote development of clarity, communion, creativity and compassion. A corresponding learning process, culminating in empathetic sharing, is engaged alongside traditional learning paths for the purpose of moving beyond contemporary processes emphasizing competitive, standardized individual academic achievement.*

*I advocate requiring (e.g., once/academic year) that all school-age youth be given the opportunity to select a specific concept or skill to teach to others in need (e.g., peers, younger students, family, community members, civic leaders); supported by the level of skilled facilitation necessary to guide young teacher/learners in developing emancipatory learning goals, mastering content, understanding learner characteristics, exploring social pedagogies, receiving feedback, reflecting on implementation and refining practice.*

**Keywords:** *Critical contemplative pedagogy, Youth empowerment, Transformative learning*

## Introduction: Embracing the Challenges of our Time

These are troubling times. Life in contemporary schools and society is diminished by sustained exposure to rising authoritarianism and economic inequality, racial/ethnic/cultural/ political/religious persecution, violent conflict resolution and environmental degradation. Immersed in complex crises, we lapse into denial, division, distrust and despair. Our aspirations for and approaches to civic learning and life are limited in response to relentless pressures toward expediency rather than significance, control rather than creativity, self-righteous defensiveness rather than empathy and compassion. We retreat from the natural world, from each other, from unfamiliar ideas and experiences, from our hopes and our dreams. We abdicate agency—our capacity and responsibility

to think, feel and act on our own and others' behalf. Democracy is threatened, state supported schooling is imperiled, our children and youth are endangered.

Yet there is hope. Rather than submitting to imposed constraint and control; rather than accepting an impoverished view of humanity and the natural world; rather than grasping at shallow quick-fix solutions, and when these fail, lapsing into fear, apathy, anger or sorrow; together we might move to embrace the challenges of our time. Full embrace requires first seeking clarity—deep, comprehensive, collective understanding acknowledging the depth, scope and complexity of the crises before us. Full embrace then requires rallying the creativity, compassion and courage necessary to move together towards transformative social change along solution paths commensurate to the crises at hand. Education is central to this task.

In this essay integrating social and educational philosophy, policy and practice, I first outline the phenomenon of neoliberal globalization—a dominant though tragic worldview—and the consequences of our compliance centering on schooling and the welfare of children and youth. Then, inspired by philosophers, teachers, social activists and spiritual leaders representing critical, progressive, contemplative and holistic perspectives across time and cultures, I trace the development of a transformative educational philosophy that I will refer to as *politically engaged holism*. Consistent with this guiding vision, the spiritual dimension of learning and life is acknowledged and fully engaged with careful attention to equity and inclusion. Higher order learning skills currently promoted via established curricular mandates are expanded to promote development of clarity, communion, creativity and compassion. A corresponding learning process, culminating in empathetic sharing, is engaged alongside traditional learning paths for the purpose of moving beyond contemporary processes emphasizing competitive, standardized individual academic achievement.

After providing examples of critical contemplative pedagogies that might be employed to enact politically engaged holistic philosophy, I turn to the unique potential of preparing all learners to serve as teachers. I contend that the most powerful critical contemplative pedagogy available to us in times of deep crisis is that of supporting all children and youth in *learning to teach and teaching to learn* as a primary path toward self-realization, social inquiry and civic contribution. This vital opportunity should be made available to all young people, regardless of perceived academic ability, especially to those whose access to voice and to power is limited. I conclude with a call-to-action advocating for the extension of learning to teach and teaching to learn to all people, from early childhood through adulthood, as a fundamental human right to be supported and practiced across all dimensions of our social and civic lives.

## Confronting Crises: Neoliberal Globalization

Grounded in classical liberalism and neo-classical economics; emanating from U.S. based global institutions including the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, then embraced by power brokers around the globe; neoliberalism remains the definitive ideological paradigm of our time. This comprehensive worldview now dominates social, political, economic and educational landscapes, driving understanding of and response to systemic social and environmental crises (Dardot & Laval, 2013).

Neoliberalism as a social philosophy is characterized by faith in economic determinism, acquisitive individualism, entitlement ethics and meritocracy. Its central tenets are explicitly materialistic. Economic determinism is accepted as the fundamental force shaping learning and life.

Humans are characterized as necessarily self-interested and competitive. Acquisitive individualism is required for survival and equated with personal virtue (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001; Olssen, 2010; Vallier, 2022).

Neoliberalism as a political and economic theory is centered in free market capitalism, globalization, deregulation and privatization of public services. Priorities centered on acquisition and security define and drive nearly all aspects of human identity and interaction. Pressures toward increasing competition, consumption, compliance and inequality shape our lives (Giroux, 2004; Harvey, 2005; Shah, 2010).

Engulfed in this pervasive and determinant social vision, the direct and often dire repercussions for human development and interaction, for social and environmental sustainability, are rarely articulated. Beyond the political and economic consequences of neoliberalism are profound implications for what it means to survive, to live and to learn as fully engaged and evolving people; to participate in governance, civic life and mass state-supported education (Apple, Kenway & Singh, 2005; Brown, 2015; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001; Olssen, 2010).

## Consequences of Compliance

Among the consequences of global compliance with neoliberal philosophy, policy and practice is large scale environmental degradation. Social and cultural crises are exacerbated as competition for scarce resources intensifies. Expressions of white supremacy, neo-colonialism, political and religious intolerance; dramatic economic inequality and associated loss of political representation; civil unrest, war and human rights violations; mass dislocation, disease and starvation; all deepen and expand (Agathangelou & Killian, 2022; Darian-Smith, 2022; Heynen, McCarthy, Prudham & Robbins, 2007).

Tragically, the imposition of neoliberal culture renders individuals, voluntary collectives and social institutions woefully unprepared to address systemic, mutually reinforcing, humanitarian and environmental crises. Although promoted as a culture of unbridled opportunity, neoliberalism is most often experienced as a culture of fear and constraint. Across all social domains, global capitalism diminishes human experience, development and potential by amplifying proclivities towards self-centeredness, greed, aggression, insecurity and demoralization. As opportunities for personal intellectual, emotional and ethical development are diminished, so too is the efficacy of primary social institutions, most significantly systems of governance and mass state-supported education (Casey, 2016; Giroux, 2004, 2008; Whyte, 2019).

**Democracy in peril.** Democracy as a form of governance, while always difficult to sustain, is uniquely threatened during times of material and moral challenge. As political processes are corrupted via access to wealth and power, democracy is reduced to the illusion of representation masking underlying totalitarian tendencies. Both established and emerging democracies are threatened not only by authoritarian regimes beyond their borders, but also by extremist populist movements within. Relentless disinformation campaigns, voter suppression, civil rights violations and restrictions on free press and political protest fuel dangerous levels of distrust, aggression, political tribalism and legislative impasse (Applebaum, 2020; Dewey, 1927; Snyder, 2018; Ziblatt & Levitsky, 2018).

**Schooling in peril.** Dependent upon full participation of diverse, civically educated and engaged populations, democracies are further threatened by demonstrable declines in the quality of education provided to the masses. State-supported school systems are confronted with convergent pressures emerging from increasingly centralized and bureaucratized government policies and

global mandates, aggressively marketed entrepreneurial initiatives, powerful special interest lobbies and persistent efforts to privatize public educational systems. Retreat from deep, systemic, democratic education reform is repeatedly reinforced (Apple, 2006; Apple, Kenway & Singh, 2005; De Lissovoy, 2015; Lipman, 2004; Porfilio & Malott, 2008).

Absent an explicit learning theory, knowledge is perceived as a form of individually acquired capital to be accumulated through relentless competition. As a marketable commodity, the utility of education is determined by the extent to which its consumption advances both state and individual prosperity and security. Curriculum is narrowed to support strong test performance on basic skills in literacy and mathematics, in addition to gaining proficiency in subjects contributing directly to competitive state economies, rather than aimed at supporting progressive development across the social and natural sciences, the arts and humanities (Casey, 2016; Ward, 2012; Weiner, 2005).

Of particular concern is the decline of civic education. Documented loss of time and attention is accompanied by efforts to disseminate inaccurate and socially unjust historical representations that perpetuate systems of social oppression (e.g., colonialism, white supremacy, racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity). Capacities critical to sustaining vibrant democracy—social empathy, inquiry, critique and imagination—are neither recognized nor supported, in many cases actively discouraged. Defining education as an individual consumptive act obscures aspirations for equal access to higher-level content, socially engaged pedagogy and multidimensional (intellectual, emotional, physical, ethical, aesthetic) opportunities for personal and communal development. The consequences for children and youth are profound (Apple, 2018; Banks, 2021; Barrow, 2017; Heybach & Sheffield, 2014; Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2006; Kurth-Schai, 2014; Stratton, 2016; Tarozzi & Torres, 2016).

**Children and youth in peril.** Historically the welfare of children and youth has been jeopardized by inaccurate assumptions concerning the nature of child/youth development. Particularly problematic are misleading expectations regarding the societal roles that young people are capable of, and empowered by, assuming. Although presumptions regarding youth are social constructions that vary across time and culture, dominant images of childhood are united in their failure to acknowledge the potential of young people to contribute to the social order (Kurth-Schai, 1988). Youth are confronted with confusing and contradictory patterns of protection and pressure, with conflicting perceptions of their abilities and inadequacies, that render their social presence inconsequential, their social power neither recognized nor appreciated (Kurth-Schai, 1991b, 1994, 1997). Resultant feelings of fear, frustration, hopelessness and isolation are exacerbated in response to a constellation of current crises—war, displacement, homelessness, food insecurity, global pandemic and its politicization, climate change, remote or interrupted schooling, bullying and disinformation amplified by social media, and legislative and court decisions affecting historically marginalized identities (Benforado, 2023; Bishop & Pringle, 2023; Dean & Wagon, 2019; Horton, Pimlott-Wilson & Hall, 2021; UNICEF, 2021).

Overall, neoliberal culture constrains expression of human intelligence, imagination and integrity. Continued compliance will not only endanger the welfare of children and youth but also impede the advancement of democratic governance, education and civil society. There must be another way to respond to deep crises, another way to orient ourselves to the world and to each other. In response to the challenges posed by neoliberal globalization, enactment of a contrasting worldview, a socially just and environmentally sustainable social vision, is required.

**Finding Hope: Politically Engaged Holism**

Fortunately, there is hope. The challenges before us, though daunting, are not unprecedented. Across time and cultures, philosophers, teachers, social activists and spiritual leaders—representing critical, progressive, contemplative and holistic perspectives—have worked tirelessly to create, and then to compel, collective experience of a unifying ethical vision. Emerging within tragic social contexts, *spiritually engaged progressives* and *socially engaged Buddhists* have charted parallel paths to guide collective movement. They have centered their hope in an expansive assessment of human potential, united in the belief that as humans we are complexly unique and equally worthy. They have framed their parallel visions as a new way of being—an inclusive, life-affirming and sustainable social and educational philosophy that I will refer to as politically engaged holism.

Informed by original works and contemporary interpretations, we find streams of progressive thought signaling that spiritual development is necessary for full expression of human potential. Education of the masses must therefore acknowledge and attend to a spiritual dimension of learning and life. Glimpses of progressive education engaging a spiritual dimension are expressed by proponents of pragmatism (Dewey, 1934; Garrison, 2010; Unger, 2007), critical theory (Freire, 2000; Purpel, 2004), feminism (hooks, 2003), postmodernism (Hickman, 2007; Oldenski & Carlson, 2002) and the black radical tradition (Du Bois, 2019; McCluskey, 2014); in addition to teacher/scholars advocating indigenous/anti-colonialist (Cajete, 1994; Deloria,1979; Sefa Dei, 2011), ecological justice/sustainability (Riley-Taylor, 2002; Seidel & Jardine, 2014), holistic (Miller, 2019; Miller, Karsten, Denton, Orr & Kates, 2005), Montessori (Standing, 1957) and Waldorf (Steiner, 2008) education. The call to attend to the spiritual development of all learners is carried through the twentieth century and on into present, gaining renewed attention in relation to systemic crises (e.g., over-consumption, violent conflict resolution, authoritarianism, religious and political fundamentalism, environmental destruction) deemed irresolvable within the philosophical frameworks dominating contemporary schools and society.

Drawing from both Asian and Western interpretations of classical Buddhist texts and lay Buddhist social movements, we find streams of Buddhist thought embracing the belief that spiritual development is promoted not through distancing oneself from the trials of human life, but instead by working to alleviate personal and collective suffering on a day-by-day, moment-by-moment basis. Education for social activism consistent with Buddhist reform traditions—including Nichiren, Zen and Tibetan streams of Mahayana, and Thai Forest and Vipassana streams of Theravada—is advocated by clergy and lay practitioners throughout Asia. Included are Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (Bethel, 1989), Daisaku Ikeda (2010), Thich Nhat Hanh (Ellsberg, 2001), Somdech Prea Maha Ghosananda and A. T. Ariyaratne (King, 2006), Bhikkhu Buddhadasa (2005), Sulak Sivaraksa (2005), and His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso (1999). These teachings—responsive to contexts shaped by war, political oppression, mass dislocation and natural disaster—are enacted as social movements referred to as socially engaged Buddhism.

*Gifts of Alignment*

Four generative themes expressed across the works of politically engaged holists offer deepened understanding of what it means to live and learn as complex, multidimensional, imper-

fect yet aspiring human beings. These themes trace the landscape of a socially just and environmentally sustainable worldview that holds promise for mitigating challenges posed by neoliberal globalization.

**Spirit.** Looking beyond neoliberal assumptions regarding the primacy of materialism are visions of a multifaceted reality that holds the material and the spiritual in dynamic balance. Spirit is defined not as a distinct or separate dimension, but rather as a fundamental attribute that infuses and radiates from all entities: an exploratory, integrative, inherently idiosyncratic and unpredictable yet unifying force. Spirit is further defined not as a religious doctrine or prescribed set of practices, but instead as an orientation aimed at revealing ultimate meaning to be expressed as fidelity of high purpose (grounded aspiration) and comprehensive action (transformation). Though understandably controversial in societies embracing either secularism or religious fundamentalism, recognition and cultivation of a spiritual dimension provides a generative frame for reimagining life in a fiercely materialistic, competitive, cynical and divisive neoliberal age (Dewey, 1934; Garrison, 2010; Maslow, 1971; Miller, 2019; Miller et al., 2005; Oldenski & Carlson, 2002; Riley-Taylor, 2002).

**Ethics of relationship.** Released from the limitations of neoliberalism, a contrasting ethical vision provides the foundation for new ways of living and learning in the world. Although a highly individualized process, moral development—the ascent of human spirit—is equally and necessarily a cultural and communal endeavor. The nature of reality, and of humanity, is inherently relational, profoundly social; everything and everyone are joined in webs of ever-evolving relationship. People exist, interact and learn as social selves—actively drawn to sustain relationships within (integration of multidimensional personal identities), relationships among (engagement on a person-to-person basis, building connections that build community) and relationships that move beyond (connections with broader, often newly emergent, social and environmental systems and forces). Humans are difficult to limit or contain. They are necessarily curious, creative, experimental, altruistic; capacities for self-cultivation and social contribution are continually expanded, deepened and integrated. Humans are empathetic and pragmatically collaborative. Resources are offered and distinctive contributions developed in response to insightful analyses of personal and communal needs and aspirations (Cajete, 1994; Dalai Lama, 1999; Doll & Gough, 2006; Hansen, 2007; King, 2006; Kurth-Schai, 1997).

**Wisdom.** In sharp contrast to neoliberal assumptions asserting a profoundly instrumental appraisal of socially sanctioned knowledge and values, are aspirations for widespread participation in processes of social inquiry aimed at experiencing and evolving wisdom. Wisdom is relational—at once intensely personal and essentially social. Wisdom is multisensory, interdisciplinary and multi-paradigmatic—effectively connective across physical, temporal, emotional, intellectual, ethical, political and spiritual domains. Wisdom is exploratory—open, divergent, creative, prophetic, surprising. Wisdom is integrative—synthesizing efforts toward truth, beauty and justice thereby engaging learning experiences of highest significance and deepest meaning (Garrison, 1997; Ikeda, 2004; Kimmerer, 2013; Reagan, 1996; Standish & Saito, 2012).

**Teaching and learning as gift exchange.** Wisdom is acquired by means of a fully relational, exploratory and integrative learning process. As such, wisdom is experienced, evolved and exchanged as a gift rather than a commodity. Wisdom is valued not for short-term utility and individual gain, but cherished instead for the promise of timeless possibility, for access to significant challenge and choice that yields transformative response on personal and societal levels. Teaching/learning as gift exchange takes shape as an ascending spiral progressing through contemplative and critical phases as follows:

- Preparation: Seeking, questioning, expanding receptivity while focusing intent.
- Insight/Inspiration: Attending to experiences of intellectual, emotional, social, ethical and aesthetic resonance.
- Meaning Making: Reflecting, interpreting, grounding knowledge of inspirational quality to fully comprehend its real-world significance.
- Creative Development: Adding value, tailoring the gift of learning not only to enrich one's own life, but also to support others in a manner fully aware and respectful of their needs, hopes and dreams.
- Empathetic Sharing: Translating, living, sharing what one has learned in a manner that enhances the quality of life, the quality of relationships among self and others (Kurth-Schai, 1992; Kurth-Schai & Green, 1997, 2016).

Both spiritually engaged progressives and socially engaged Buddhists understood that full realization of politically engaged holism could only be achieved and sustained through a persistently experiential, experimental and relational process—a process guided by an evolving sense of renewed purpose, supported by revitalized practice and grounded in creative response to the challenges of daily life while radiating outward to shape principled action in response to emerging global crises. They understood that special attention must be devoted to the education of children and youth so that thoughtful participation in social reform and renewal could be sustained over the course of a lifetime (Adorjan & Kelly, 2008; Dewey, 1927, 1939; Bethel, 1989; Ikeda, 2004; Sulak, 2005). In response, we are called to educate for more socially and spiritually engaged sensing/feeling/thinking/acting/being. We are further challenged to consider how such experiences might be made available to *all* children and youth, even within financially and bureaucratically constrained state-supported school systems.

**Renewing Purpose: Schooling for Self-realization, Social Inquiry and Civic Contribution**

Emergent within contexts of crisis, those engaged in education reform guided by politically engaged holism have found it necessary to re-envision the very purpose of state-supported education. Rather than seeking to prepare all individuals to serve the political and economic needs of the nation-state, state-supported education is redirected towards preparing all learners to find meaning, to act with integrity, and therefore to experience genuine hope even in the face of seemingly insurmountable barriers. Wary of mass education that perpetuates proclivities towards self-centeredness, greed, aggression, insecurity and demoralization, spiritually engaged progressives and socially engaged Buddhists have worked diligently to cultivate the distinctive potential of each person to act as a higher self—a socially conscious self—expressing clarity, communion, creativity and compassion throughout all aspects of their lives.

*Clarity*

All people must be supported in learning to interpret the world with clarity. Clarity is the expression of integrative and illuminating potential. Clarity reveals a comprehensive interpretive frame characterized by synthesis of varied dimensions of truth, of truth and value, of multiple ways of knowing.

The civic function of clarity is to seek, to challenge and continually refine shared truth necessary to guide collective action in a constantly changing world (Bethel, 1989; Dewey, 1922; Garrison, 1997; Hickman, 2007; Ikeda, 2004; Nhat Hanh, 2012). We educate to cultivate clarity so that we might illuminate the complexities of human existence. For only through clarity can we extract the "full meaning of each present moment" (Dewey, 1938, p. 50). Only through clarity are we freed from personal prejudice, from the allure of deceit and disinformation, so that we might engage in social inquiry and civic contribution in an open, enlightened and efficacious manner (Ikeda, 2004, 2010).

## Communion

All people must be supported in learning to establish and sustain communion. Communion is the expression of connective and harmonizing potential. Communion defines the quality of relationship necessary to enhance life across dimensions of existence—interdisciplinary (across fields of inquiry), intrapersonal (within oneself), interpersonal (among self and others) and transpersonal (among self and broader social and natural systems). Although each unique self is inherently expansive, growth can only occur within the context of reciprocal, trusting, generous and supportive yet challenging relationships.

The civic function of communion is to transform the experience of diversity as a threat into diversity as an integral and generative aspect of collective life. Diversity within unity is sustained through genuine dialogue and empathetic deliberation (Bethel, 1989; Dewey, 1916, 1927; Garrison, 2010; Garrison, Hickman & Ikeda, 2014; Ikeda, 2004, 2010). We educate to cultivate communion so that in response to diverse perspectives we might seek common ground rather than resort to conflict; so that together we might re-imagine who we collectively are, and who we might become, beyond our differences (Green, 2008).

## Creativity

All people must be supported in learning to respond to discord and uncertainty with creativity. Creativity is the expression of poetic and resonant potential. It is a generative process engaging conceptual, material, emotional, ethical and aesthetic dimensions. Jim Garrison (2019) suggests the essence of creativity is poiesis—the act of calling into existence that which has never appeared before. This unlimited poetic potential exists within us all. As we cultivate it, we are transformed—capable of recognizing and responding to each new situation in an innovative, unique and harmonious manner.

The civic potential of a creative act is engaged as its power resonates beyond its source. Positive qualities are amplified and radiated outward through webs of interdependent relationships. We educate to cultivate creativity so that we might "intervene in the world to ameliorate suffering and discord. Such poetry recognizes the possibilities of experienced situations and overcomes obstacles by creatively transforming them to realize our ethical ideals" (Garrison, et al., 2014, pp. 203-204).

## Compassion

All people must be supported in learning to respond to life's challenges and opportunities with compassion. Compassion is the expression of empathetic and emancipatory potential. While

effectively responsive to individual needs and aspirations, approaches to education aimed at nurturing compassion emphasize each person's unique capacity and responsibility to contribute acts of courage, respect, caring and solidarity in support of others (Ikeda, 2004). Genuine empathy expressed in action is not paternalistic, passive, unimaginative or self-sacrificial (Garrison, 2010). Instead, engaging in compassionate response marks the path toward liberation from personal and societal limitations. As we practice compassion, we acquire wisdom and therefore grow in our capacity for ethical response not only to like-minded others, but also to those whose life experiences and commitments differ greatly from our own (Ikeda, 2010).

The civic function of compassion is to engage and sustain social courage—principled risk-taking with and for those who are least well served by prevailing social, cultural, political and economic arrangements. We educate to cultivate compassion so that we, as individuals, community members and citizens, might summon the courage necessary to act with integrity—our highest ideals faithfully expressed as intelligent, creative and benevolent responses to whatever comes our way.

## Revitalizing Practice: Pedagogies of Enlightenment and Empowerment

The task of revitalizing civic learning and life in times of deep crisis can only unfold along challenging paths. As educators and citizens, our pressing responsibility and critical opportunity is twofold. We must cultivate personal potentials for clarity, communion, creativity and compassion while working to shape collective experience of these qualities across educational settings inclusive of all children and youth. It is in relation to this challenge/opportunity that pedagogy consistent with politically engaged holism holds promise. Drawing from historical and contemporary crisis-driven education reform efforts, I propose pedagogies of enlightenment and pedagogies of empowerment as conceptual and experiential maps to guide our path forward (Kurth-Schai, 2023).

Pedagogies of enlightenment cultivate personal and communal gifts of intrapersonal growth. Contemplative/holistic aspirations of clarity and communion are emphasized. Transformative experiences of insight and inspiration are engaged through skilled and persistent individual practice. Pedagogies of empowerment cultivate personal and communal gifts of interpersonal growth. Critical/progressive aspirations of creativity and compassion are emphasized. Transformative experiences of social inquiry and advocacy are engaged through skilled facilitation of diverse and inclusive collective participation. While pedagogies of enlightenment move learners through the early phases of the gift exchange learning process (from preparation to insight/inspiration to meaning-making), pedagogies of empowerment advance the latter phases (from meaning-making to creative development to empathetic sharing).

Pedagogies of enlightenment and empowerment represent categories of complex approaches to teaching and learning. There are many options, each holding promise not only as teaching strategies but also as research methods. Based upon my own efforts to re-envision education and democracy in times of crisis—in collaboration with students, teachers and professional and community colleagues in the United States, Thailand and Japan—I offer examples of accessible points of entry as follows:

*Pedagogies of Enlightenment*

Even in the darkest times, individuals can experience renewed meaning, fulfillment and growth through skilled and persistent expression of insight and inspiration.

**Insight.** Insight is the capacity to suspend habits of thought and emotion, thereby enhancing receptivity and heightening awareness, leading to deepened understanding and enriched relationships. Surprising, expansive, integrative, resonant, uplifting, transformative— experiences of insight are described across time and cultures. Often framed as religious or spiritual experience, insight entails profound "awakening—a reorientation of the whole person" (Hickman, 2007, p.199). Such moments of enlightenment are accessible to all, emergent within the rhythms of daily life (Garrison, 2010, 2019; Ikeda, 2010; Maslow, 1971; Nhat Hanh, 2012; Reagan, 1996).

Insight, as direct unmediated perception cannot be planned or orchestrated. Insights can however be cultivated as gifts of disciplined openness—all people can learn to invite insight. The process can be advanced through meditative practice. Although there are many approaches to meditation—varied sitting and walking forms, tai chi, yoga, chanting, calligraphy, dance, creating mandalas—the path of inquiry remains the same. When practiced with discipline and persistence, the learner moves through experiential stages progressing from focused attention to freedom from distractions, to enhanced receptivity, to heightened awareness whereby the self is not lost but instead expanded to "stand at the threshold of infinite while maintaining identity and capacity necessary to act in the finite" (Garrison, 2010, p. 3). It is in this state that insight may occur, and when it does, we are fundamentally changed. Rather than seeking to escape the pressures of the world to dwell in some utopian state, instead we are compelled to engage our daily lives with deeper clarity, communion and compassion.

Meditation is a discipline, an art to be practiced and refined throughout the course of a lifetime. Yet there are accessible points of entry suitable for use in secular or mixed-faith settings. A simple 15-minute meditation, composed of five 3-minute components, is described as follows:

1. Exploring Alignment: Sit or stand in an uplifted yet relaxed position.
2. Exploring Focused Awareness: Attend to dominant physical sensations.
3. Exploring Undifferentiated Awareness: No words, no images, no boundaries, focus on the background of discrete experience.
4. Exploring Heightened Awareness: Attend to subtleties not previously experienced, sustain a sense of expectant openness.
5. Free write to ground the experience.

**Inspiration.** Inspiration is the capacity to find meaning and hope that motivates altruism and resolve when confronted with challenge and change. Poetic representations—including storytelling, uplifting anthems and other aesthetic linguistic forms—emphasize emotional, ethical, artistic and spiritual dimensions of learning and life. As noted by Gregory Cajete (1994), indigenous traditions of oral poetry were utilized to discourage conceptual analysis and suspend critical reflection to "enchant the hearers and draw them into…a dance of meaning in which complex images, symbols and meanings are explored in direct and personal ways…affecting and engaging individuals deeply and multi-dimensionally" (p. 133). Beauty, thereby, awakens wisdom and deepens commitment.

Although the use of poetry as a source of inspiration pervades politically engaged holistic practice (Nhat Hanh, 1999; Ikeda, 2014), it was Tsunesaboro Makiguchi who pioneered the use of

poetry as an approach to aesthetic inquiry accessible to all people, including school-aged children and youth. Makiguchi began his career as an elementary school teacher serving an impoverished fishing village in northern Japan. Disheartened by the rise of industrialization, militarism and emperor worship, he developed a humane and practical approach to teaching and learning designed to help young students find meaning and hope even in the most austere and difficult circumstances (Bethel,1989). During a visit to Soka University in Tokyo, revered retired teachers shared stories of Makiguchi's use of a disciplined, exploratory approach to poetry. His approach was disciplined in that it was highly structured and repetitive—centered in Japanese non-rhyming forms of either haiku (3 lines: 5-7-5 syllables) or tanka (5 lines: 5-7-5-7-7 syllables)—both aimed at focusing intent, at moving to the heart of the matter. His approach was exploratory in that it was open-ended and creative; aimed at awakening, at motivating principled action. Because their lives were so harsh, Makiguchi encouraged young children to write a poem at the beginning of each school day describing how they might create, or do, or offer something of value. Teachers and older students were asked to write at the end of each day so that they might capture and enact the most important lessons learned.

Poems developed and shared in this manner can also be used to encourage and sustain each other in response to troubling social events. In classrooms and community settings, poetry as a socially redemptive process can be engaged as follows:

1. Using a structured format, each participant is asked to compose a poem reflecting their response to a specific social event or concern for the future.
2. Individual poems are then shared in small groups, attending to both common themes and unique perspectives.
3. Together group members then compose one or a series of poems describing actions they might take to address critical concerns raised (Kurth-Schai & Green, 2016).

Many of today's children and youth are traumatized. In response to all forms of identity-based oppression, dislocation and homelessness, poverty and hunger, war and gun violence, cyber bullying and misinformation, isolation and learned helplessness—their sense of self and security are continually challenged in profound and consequential ways (Bishop & Pringle, 2023; Dean & Wagon, 2019; Horton, Pimlott-Wilson & Hall, 2021; UNICEF, 2021). Perhaps now more than ever, the path towards self-realization—towards development of increasingly complex, creative and socially-oriented self-definitions—requires dynamic balancing of individual needs for self-care and affirmation with opportunities to respond with empathy and compassion to the needs and aspirations of others. This balance can be advanced via pedagogies of enlightenment.

### *Pedagogies of Empowerment*

Even in the darkest times, together we can deepen democracy and promote life-affirming social change through skilled and persistent facilitation of social inquiry and social advocacy.

**Social Inquiry.** Social inquiry is the capacity to learn with, from and for diverse others—to construct knowledge in a respectful, consensual and purposeful manner. Committed to a democratic social ethic, John Dewey (1910, 1916, 1939) envisioned and evolved deliberation as an inclusive, contextually responsive, imaginative and conciliatory approach to social inquiry. Rather than attempt to determine the course of collective action or to resolve social disputes via debate, Dewey worked to ensure free and full consideration of diverse, often conflicting, perspectives as

necessary to yield authentic consensus—acts of creative compromise through which multiple positions could be included and represented with integrity. As a point of entry to social inquiry, skilled facilitation can be employed to ensure that all participants engage fully in each of the following steps adapted from Dewey's conceptualization of a complete act of thought (1910):

1. Identify the problematic situation, a complex dilemma that creates confusion because it cannot be understood or resolved solely based on past experience.
2. Define and clarify one specific problem, acknowledging and analyzing every important dimension devoting special attention to issues of immediate collective concern.
3. Develop a series of possible strategies for resolving the specific problem.
4. Arrive at consensus regarding one potentially promising solution path.
5. Assess the solution path's validity by acting on it in a challenging community-based setting and then evaluating the social impact.
6. Collectively evaluate participants' experience of the deliberative process, then join together in determining next steps.

**Social Advocacy.** Social advocacy is the capacity to enhance understanding across domains of power and difference to effect inclusive, just and compassionate social change. In his classic text, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paulo Freire (1970/2000) charted what was to become a widely embraced philosophical and pedagogical path towards effective social advocacy. He began by asserting that education is inherently political. He alleged that teaching/learning for social justice must begin with those whose power is limited, then move to engage others across the political spectrum. To this end, Freire developed problem-posing education—a cyclical process designed to grant voice to the oppressed (moving from expression of individual experience to a sense of shared solidarity); engage critical consciousness (moving from the personal to the political, demystifying systems of social oppression); and then facilitate praxis (reflective participation in principled social action) (Freire, 2000, 2005). Problem posing education can be adapted for use in classroom and community settings to empower groups of individuals who share the experience of a specific form of socially imposed disadvantage. Skilled facilitation can be employed to engage all participants in the following steps:

1. Describe the disadvantage or social barrier to be addressed.
2. Summarize important experiences, needs and hopes of the group to be empowered.
3. Develop a problem-posing visual code to help participants better understand their personal experiences in relation to the social problem or barriers they face.
4. Based on the problem-posing code, develop key questions inviting participants to share personal experience and to carefully consider the experiences of others.
5. Based also on the problem-posing code, develop key questions to facilitate critical reflection on the disadvantage under consideration.
6. Develop a solution-oriented visual code depicting a broad goal or direction for positive change.
7. Based upon the solution-oriented code, develop key questions to help participants decide on one specific action they might take to improve their lives.

Today's children and youth are disempowered by ageism and generational isolation. Perhaps now more than ever, young people must be supported in moving beyond expression of voice, to full participation in social inquiry and civic contribution regarding complex and consequential

societal concerns. In mixed-aged settings, pedagogies of empowerment can be carefully structured to balance anonymous contribution of ideas (encouraging risk-taking and creativity while ensuring that consideration is not biased by knowing its source), with opportunities to share thoughts publicly (encouraging responsibility, ownership and placing thoughts in context) (Caraballo, Lozenski, Lyiscott & Morrell, 2017; Kurth-Schai, 1991a). In this manner, truly collaborative cross-age civic efforts are initiated and sustained whereby both youth and adult contributions are evaluated and experienced as equally necessary and valuable (Kurth-Schai, 1994).

**Re-envisioning Reform: Learning to Teach, Teaching to Learn**

In times of deep crisis, the most powerful critical contemplative pedagogy that we might employ on behalf of children and youth, their teachers and the whole of humanity is that of learning to teach and teaching to learn. For all school-aged youth, we could provide carefully designed opportunities to comprehend and enact principles and practices of teaching appropriate to their evolving interests and abilities. Fully engaging the educational purpose, process and pedagogies aligned with politically engaged holism, this vital opportunity should be made available to all young people, regardless of perceived academic ability, especially to those whose access to voice and to power is limited.

The science, the art, the power of teaching as a primary means of advancing both personal and social transformation is a resonant theme throughout politically engaged holistic practice, as is the call to support all people in assuming such tasks within the context of their daily lives. These pivotal themes are best captured in descriptions of the Bodhisattva way.

I was introduced to the origins of this metaphor while visiting a temple in northern Thailand. A young monk focused our attention on an ancient painting of the Buddha seated under a bodhi tree beside a lotus pond. He said it was at this moment that the Buddha, though enlightened, decided to forgo the opportunity to leave this world, choosing instead to remain as a teacher assisting others in moving along the path. He further explained that each being, like each lotus, charts a distinctive course as they rise through the turbulent waters of life. Therefore, the Bodhisattva— the ever evolving and effectively responsive teacher (Campbell, 1972; Garrison, 2010; Ikeda, Saito, Endo & Suda, 2003)—must continually engage deeper empathy, wisdom and compassion so that they might grow in their capacity to tailor instruction to the varied needs of diverse learners.

*An Innovative Approach*

The works of politically engaged holists suggest that we all have the potential and the responsibility to practice the Bodhisattva way—to support others as they navigate the challenges of life by responding as empathetic, wise and compassionate teachers—not only in schools but also in social and civic settings (Bethel, 1989; Dewey, 1939; Freire, 1998; Garrison, 2010; hooks, 2003; Ikeda et al., 2003; Ikeda 2010; Nhat Hanh, 2012). Introducing opportunities for school-age youth to practice the Bodhisattva way represents a strikingly generative opportunity. Given the severity and complexity of challenges confronting contemporary school systems, an accessible point of entry would be to develop curricular guidelines and pedagogical best practices that routinely require (e.g., once/academic year); all school-aged youth (early childhood – late adolescence) regardless of their perceived academic ability and responsive to their individual needs, interests and developmental level; to select a specific concept or skill to teach to others in need (e.g., peers, younger students, family or community members, civic leaders).

For example, preschoolers might be given the opportunity to teach peers how to care for younger siblings or household pets; upper elementary students might be taught to teach basic science concepts to younger students; secondary school students might analyze a significant and timely social concern and then offer a range of educational and advocacy events to engage the broader public.

As the approach to teaching advocated by politically engaged holists requires skill, sensitivity and creativity far beyond that required for teaching-as-telling (i.e., direct, mass instruction), this important learning opportunity must be supported by the level of proficient facilitation necessary to guide young teacher/learners in understanding the needs, interests and developmental characteristics of others, developing emancipatory learning goals, mastering content, exploring social pedagogies, receiving feedback, reflecting on implementation and refining practice (Kurth-Schai, 2014). Though supplemented by group instruction when appropriate, this series of complex tasks is best accomplished via one-on-one coaching relationships. Classroom teachers and instructional support staff, in addition to carefully trained older students and community volunteers, could serve as coaches.

### Supporting Implementation

Learning to teach, teaching to learn comes to life when introduced in workshop settings. In my experience, educational studies faculty, teacher educators and both aspiring and practicing teachers welcome the opportunity to engage together in exploring this complex critical contemplative pedagogy. To deepen and extend collective consideration, I have developed and utilized the following brief but targeted scenarios for purposes of illustrating defining criteria of learning to teach, teaching to learn; distinguishing the technique from related social pedagogies; prompting clarifying questions; and catalyzing discussion/deliberation aimed at addressing cautions, challenges and creative applications.

**Scenario 1.** When Joey's kindergarten teacher tells her students that they will each choose their own Helper Project, Joey decides that he would like to help his four-year-old brother who hates to brush his teeth. "I keep telling Jonny that he should just do it and not get so upset but he just stamps his foot and shouts 'NO!', I don't know if anyone can help him." Joey's teacher pairs him with a college student working toward his teaching license who helps Joey create a tooth brushing game featuring talking dinosaurs (Jonny's favorite) to make the process not only informative, but also fun.

**Scenario 2.** Fifth grader Maya has always struggled with math. When her teacher announces that all 5th graders will select an I Can Teach Project she slams her book shut and storms out of the classroom. When a teacher's aide then catches up with her in the hallway, Maya protests: "No one would ever let me teach anything, especially math, it makes me feel stupid and then I get frustrated and get into trouble." The TA responds, "But Maya, you don't have to teach math, we'll help you learn to teach anything you want that would be helpful to someone else. And, you should know that sometimes those who struggle to learn make the best teachers." She suggests that Maya might like to help several 2nd grade students who are having a hard time, just like she did. Maya agrees, then her math teacher shows her how to develop a lesson using small colorful blocks and graphing worksheets decorated with superheroes to bring mathematical concepts to life for younger students.

**Scenario 3.** Chue, Gao-Jer and Houa have been studying environmental discrimination in their social studies class. The more they learn, the more worried they become that elder members

of their community might not be receiving up-to-date information about the dangers of lead poisoning, protective measures they might take and how to gain access to government supported lead mitigation programs now offered in their state. Upon selecting their annual Civic Engagement Project, they are paired with an ELL teacher and Hmong community advocate who assist them in developing carefully targeted print and video educational materials that they will present during a special session as part of the Hmong New Year's Celebration.

In response, workshop participants begin by identifying defining criteria reflected across the scenarios— centering student choice, developmental appropriateness, inclusion and genuine response to the needs of others; requiring skilled compassionate coaching and engaged reflective teaching. Participants then move on to noting traits that distinguish learning to teach, teaching to learn from related social pedagogies. For example, cooperative learning, service learning and peer teaching are typically not directed by individual student choice, nor do they provide opportunities for all students, regardless of perceived academic ability, to learn and to demonstrate teaching best practices. Finally, teachers are supported in working together to assess and address challenges and opportunities specific to their teaching contexts, in addition to planning to support each other through the implementation process.

### *Reaping the Benefits*

Adopting learning to teach, teaching to learn can provide repeated opportunities for teachers and their students to move through all phases of the gift exchange learning cycle. As such, this critical contemplative pedagogy can serve as a primary path toward self-realization, social inquiry and civic contribution.

When first introduced to learning to teach, teaching to learn, students typically struggle both to imagine themselves as teachers and to determine what they'd like to teach that would be of value to someone else. At this point, they can be guided through the early phases of the gift exchange learning process. Progression from preparation to insight/inspiration to meaning making is supported as students experience pedagogies of enlightenment aimed at developing capacities for clarity and communion. Once students have decided who could benefit from their teaching and are ready to receive coaching regarding how best to accomplish their chosen teaching tasks, they can be guided through the latter phases of meaning making, creative development and empathetic sharing. Student capacities to express creativity and compassion are enhanced as they engage with pedagogies of empowerment.

Moreover, as school-age youth and their teachers move through the gift exchange learning process they are granted access to learning experiences that are (Kaufman, 2017; Kurth-Schai, 1994; Mah y Busch, 2014):

- contemplative/holistic—providing opportunities to cultivate focused attention, mindful intent and heightened awareness across all dimensions of human experience, heart/mind/body/spirit,
- youth-directed—providing opportunities to shape educational experience in accordance with personal needs, interests, aptitudes, aspirations and values,
- cross-generational—providing opportunities to share insights, questions and concerns with younger children and adults,

- integrative—providing opportunities to perceive issues in terms of a wide range of interrelated possibilities and consequences; to experience mutually beneficial interactions between affect and cognition, analysis and intuition, awareness and action, theory and practice, personal relevance and social significance,
- cooperative—providing opportunities to experience both personal and societal benefits of adopting egalitarian approaches to the design and realization of shared goals,
- critical/progressive—providing opportunities to make decisions of personal and societal consequence and to contribute to the welfare of others through active participation in efforts to initiate and sustain inclusive life-affirming social and educational change.

In response, the quality of student learning is enhanced. In addition to connecting with required skills and subject matter more deeply, school-age youth gain insight into the process of learning in all its complexity, mystery and wonder. Informed by deeper awareness and understanding of what good teaching requires, students gain greater respect and appreciation for their teachers. They further experience enhanced self-worth and self-confidence as they assume the role of teacher and witness positive impacts on others.

In a parallel fashion, the preparation and performance of teaching becomes more sophisticated and effective, more challenging and rewarding. Teachers are encouraged to explore and to develop the deeply personal inner landscape of their teaching practice; to teach with reverence, fully expressing their craft as authentic and undivided selves (Palmer, 1993, 1997; Rud & Garrison, 2012). They are provided repeated opportunities to cultivate clarity, communion, creativity and compassion—all factors enriched each time a teacher finds a way to successfully teach a student how to teach in a manner fully aware and respectful of that student's unique and evolving self.

Finally, due to the socially engaged nature of learning to teach, teaching to learn, enhancing the quality of both teaching and learning becomes a shared goal and responsibility for all involved in the process of schooling—students, teachers, classmates, families and community members.

## Concluding Thoughts: Our Call to Action

The power of learning to teach, teaching to learn lies in its capacity to inspire renewed educational purpose, to revitalize learning process, to enact critical contemplative pedagogy and to re-envision social and educational reform. Even within highly regulated resource-constrained school systems, we can provide opportunities for school-age youth to experience deepening self-awareness, self-worth and self-confidence by teaching something of value to others in need. We can nurture the capacity of teachers to continually grow in empathy, wisdom and compassion so that they might respond ever more creatively and effectively to the needs of diverse learners.

We can then advocate for the extension of learning to teach, teaching to learn to all people, from early childhood through adulthood, as a fundamental human right to be supported and practiced across all dimensions of our social and civic lives—in our classrooms, voluntary associations, political institutions, public service bureaucracies, philanthropic organizations and on into the streets as social movements. By doing so, we can strive to empower all people—especially those whose access to voice and power is limited—to find meaning, to act with integrity and to experience genuine hope. We can extend and enhance opportunities for all people to express their potential to discover and interpret reality, to sustain capacities for personal meaning and growth, to be nurturant and responsible, to fully participate in processes of social inquiry and social advocacy. Even in times of deep division, distrust and despair, we can strive to provide opportunities for all

people to experience the power of using their knowledge, their skills and their values, their hopes and their dreams, to change the world.

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