Neoliberalism and the Attack on Learning: Where Do We Find Hope?

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There is a growing sense that the number, complexity, depth, and breadth of crises we are experiencing should cause us to pause and consider some very deep questions. As a society, we seem unable to formulate a coherent idea of what is going on—or why. As Naomi Klein recently remarked, “it’s impossible to pry one crisis apart from the others.” In an ongoing state of confusion, we lack a way to imagine a reasonable way forward.

Catastrophic events become more numerous and frequent, yet the mainstream press coverage does little or nothing to help us understand the patterns that would, in turn, help us understand the magnitude of our troubles. Meanwhile, public trust in our major institutions—media, business, government—is at its lowest level in modern history. Globally, these figures have fallen below 50% in two-thirds of the world’s developed countries. Yet amid this existential crisis, other trends are pointing in a very different, more hopeful direction. Our historical moment is characterized by unprecedented technological connectivity, giving us access to huge amounts of information and knowledge. Fundamental questions about who we are and who we could become as humans, until recently not a part of public conversations, are emerging with a palatable urgency.

An astonishing 90% of scientists who have ever lived are alive today. We create more knowledge in one year than we have created in the last 300 years, since the beginning of the scientific revolution. Our capacity to see into distant galaxies has never been so great, and due to the expanding universe, the extent of our vision will never be matched again. The new science of cosmology is discovering universal patterns of connectivity unsuspected by earlier science, giving us the opportunity to reconsider and even transform our understanding of our place in the universe and natural world.

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Yet there seem to be powerful forces resisting any effort to engage in serious reflection about the costs or legitimacy of the assumptions, ideas, and beliefs that undergird our way of life. Why is it so difficult to discuss trends—trends we seem unable, reluctant, or simply afraid to face?

Days of Crisis and Opportunity

Media echo-chambers reinforce our thinking. Our fascination with the latest social media devices has contributed to more screen time, and less person-to-person time. Research from Sherry Terkle has suggested that use of smart phones has led to an atrophying of our abilities to empathize and self-reflect. Self-reflection generally does not happen when we are “plugged-in.” Yet perhaps the increase of feelings of loneliness and isolation, despite our technological connectedness, will lead us to find the time, space, and courage needed for self-reflection and self-knowledge. For it is from this wellspring that we might yet find a greater capacity for deeper human connections.

Joe Brewer offers another prospective point of entry. He posits that our fundamental problem is not that we lack the knowledge necessary to address even our most perplexing problems. For it is not knowledge that we lack, but rather an awareness of the magnitude of what we already know. Another way of understanding this is that our habitual ways of thinking, our “mental frames,” are too narrow and segmented for our cognitive processes to be successful. As he notes, we face “a special category of challenge that seem to have no solution because of their deeply entangled and multifaceted nature. But [they] are only problems that have yet to be adequately framed in a manner that makes their systemic nature clear.”

In summary: We are failing to translate what is already known into viable practices for managing emergent complexity. And we are increasingly in danger due to the erosion of our capacities to share and listen in conversation, to acknowledge how we feel and think, and to face what is necessary if we are to build a better future.

The process of reframing involves being able to look differently at history, and our many current predicaments. Looking and learning from what was once invisible but is now being revealed, and exploring the deep historical, cultural, and social patterns, is such a “frame.” Learning to see the invisible is applying John Dewey’s formulation that learning is more important than knowing—as the not-yet-learned is tomorrow’s new understandings. We entertain that the invisible is unknowable at our own peril.

The concept of evolution is beyond the consciousness of all animals on earth—save us. Although we may act differently, we are not only Homo sapiens, we are Homo sapiens sapiens. We are (perhaps) the one species who knows what it knows. And it is understood by many, if not most, that the universe is constantly evolving—and so is our knowledge and sense of what is possible for us as humans.

We can choose what we do with this understanding. We can choose denial, dismissing its implications, absolving ourselves of the opportunity and responsibility. Or we can embrace it, bringing new understanding, wisdom, and meaning into our existence.

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What is it that we have been missing, that if we examined it more closely, would give much needed insight into our predicaments?

**Neoliberalism, an Invisible Force**

Neoliberalism, a term poorly understood and confusing to many in our society, is increasingly gathering attention. Neoliberal policies were publicly debated, some for the first time, in last year’s presidential primaries.

The adoption of Neoliberal policies have resulted in growing economic inequalities of shocking proportions, have accelerated climate and environmental crisis, and have wreaked economic and political havoc well beyond our borders. With the onset of the Great Recession, and the view that international and national leaders responded ineffectively to its effects, criticism of neoliberal policies started to gain more ground.

Monetary policies of austerity are blamed for being punitive, ineffectual, and for making things worse for many populations across the globe. Signs of this include the consolidation of wealth in the hands of the wealthiest, the growing political polarization in the United States and Europe, and the related inability of political parties to reach any consensus for crafting meaningful solutions to growing problems.

Still, most political leaders continue to defend policies such as current international free trade agreements as simply the inevitable outcropping of globalization. The cult of efficiency—privatization of government services, shifting power to corporations, deregulation of environmental and economic protections, and the growing inequity between the richest and the rest of us—is being baked into the economic and geo-political landscape. It is eerie the degree to which these policies form part of the new norm, without any public debate, and regardless of their degree of popularity.

Yet it was precisely these neoliberal programs that led to the Great Recession. And a host of troubling symptoms still persist. With increased levels of economic insecurity, anxiety and depression, substance addictions, suicides, police violence (particularly acted out versus African American communities), and increasingly frequent outbreaks of gun violence—neoliberalism’s defenders seem to be counting on the public’s continuing difficulty understanding what it is and how it affects our world.

Neoliberalism is one version of capitalist ideology. Neoliberal policies invest absolute faith in free markets and the “natural” hierarchy of winners and losers. It posits that competition is the core characteristic of human relations. Hence, in a neoliberal meritocracy, inequality is considered normal and unavoidable, and efforts to create greater equality are morally corrosive. Inability to thrive is a personal character flaw, the fault of the individual or family.

Universal competition relies on universal quantification and comparison. That which can be measured has value over that which cannot. All are subject to a stifling regime of assessment and monitoring, perpetuating a system of winners and losers. Even the “winners” are constantly looking over their shoulders—scanning the horizon for the next threat. Such fear creates an environment in which the method of intelligence has very little space to operate, indeed.

**The Shock Doctrine: Neoliberalism and the Rise of Crisis Capitalism**

In a world drowning in information overload, it is easy for most of us to miss when the architects of neoliberalism use crisis as an opportunity to impose unpopular policies on people who are distracted, often struggling to survive.
Naomi Klein, in *The Shock Doctrine*, catalogues the history of taking advantage of national and international crises to inject neoliberal values into nation (re)building. She cites numerous examples: beginning with the 1973 assassination of democratically-elected Chilean President, Salvador Allende, through the Iraq war and Hurricane Katrina, with numerous others in between.

The strategy of “Shock and Awe,” announced days before the bombing of Baghdad and the beginning of the Iraq War, was first explicated in 1996, in Appendix A of the book *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance*. Its description leaves little room for interpretation.

Shock and Awe are actions that create fears, dangers, and destruction that are incomprehensible to the people at large, specific elements of the threat society, or the leadership. Nature in the form of tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, uncontrollable fires, famine, and disease can engender Shock and Awe.\footnote{Ending a tradition of 140 years of democratic government in Chile with the establishment of the Pinochet regime.}

The application of “disaster capitalism” was freely admitted to by Friedman, although the phrase had not yet been coined.

After Hurricane Katrina’s destruction had decimated the school system of New Orleans, Friedman wrote a *Wall Street Journal* Op Ed entitled, “The Promise of Vouchers.” Admitting that Katrina was a tragedy for the children of New Orleans, he saw in it “an opportunity to radically reform the educational system.” Of course, by this time, neoliberal thinking was deeply enсoced in national education policy. Before Katrina, there were 123 public schools in New Orleans, and seven charters. Afterward, there were four publics and 31 charters.\footnote{Naomi Klein, *Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 6.}

Voices such as Naomi Klein’s are often considered outside the margin of what reasonable people take seriously. They are not a part of most water cooler conversations. Increasingly, they must become the norm—rather than the exception.

### Neoliberalism and Education: A Closer Look

\footnote{Ibid., 6.}

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Rumblings began to be heard in the early 1970’s about the need for education to “get back to basics,” ironically, in part a response to the effectiveness of the progressive era and its success in educating a youthful citizenry that was now questioning the authority and conduct of established public institutions and power structures.

The roots of neoliberalism’s reflection hold over educational reform policies began to emerge sharply in the public sphere with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983. The report identified education’s most significant problem as the failure to adequately prepare students to contribute to the country’s economic competitiveness. The report received a fair amount of attention and its influence lasted long after its date of publication.

Indeed, it would take almost twenty years for its influence to find expression in federal policies, particularly in the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2002* (NCLB), the development of voluntary Common Core State Standards, and, later, in Race to the Top funding. Nevertheless, the dye had been cast: the trend was towards a standards-, high-stakes-assessment-, accountability-based and increasingly market-driven system.

Despite some support among advocates for educational equity, these changes have resulted in little or no gain in narrowing the “achievement gap.” They have, instead, exacerbated financial pressures on traditional public schools by redirecting funding to charters. They have required impossible academic performance goals, leading to the closing of schools and the replacing of teachers and administrators for failing to make “adequate progress.” This has led to weakening community ownership and involvement in its schools by reducing local voice in school governance.

The reform movement that began in earnest in the 1980’s put education’s emphasis not on the teacher and the learner, but on what was being taught, and for accountability purposes, how to measure academic achievement. A standards and assessment system is consistent with the neoliberal focus on the bottom line. Measurement establishes value, so what is difficult or impossible to measure is, at best, of less importance. This approach has resulted in diminished attention and understanding about who students really are, and what they need from their education.

There is a not-so-hidden cost, then, to neoliberalism’s contention that humans are reducible to *homo economicus*. The implications of this for identity development are considerable. Identity becomes equated simply with “market value.”

Collectively we seem to have little grasp, hence little or no interest in, examining the effects of neoliberalism and disaster capitalism on state and federal education policy. As Henry Giroux has noted, these educational policies have resulted in a system of “mis-education,” characterized by “manufactured illiteracies”—civic, social, moral, and political.

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One result of this is a habitual simplification, or misframing, of political discourse as being either left or right. However, since the early 1990’s the neoliberal agenda has been supported by initiatives and actions backed by all mainstream parties in the United States and, until recently, in the United Kingdom. This, of course, diverts public attention away from considering the effects of the neoliberal agenda—and opens the populace up to angry reactions against all political discourse, which is seen as corrupt, elitist, or best left to technocrats and experts. Evidence of the destruction effects of this anger is all around us.

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Hope and Compassion

It is said that when people lack hope, they have nothing.

The 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer reported that, in many parts of the world, we are in a crisis of trust, and that without trust and belief in the power and efficacy of democratic relations, we lose hope. Systems meant to protect the public good fail.

This correlates to a growing sense of injustice among many—a lack of hope and the belief that hard work is not rewarded, our children won’t have a good life, our country is not moving in the right direction, our leaders don’t care about us, and they won’t do what is right. Instead, we see a lack of confidence and the desire for forceful change through forceful leaders.17

Yet, even in times of trouble, it is also said that hope springs eternal. Hope is the foundation for the future. Being hopeful makes us realize that in the face of catastrophe, natural or human-made, lies the greatest opportunity to build a different world.18

Recognizing that, fundamentally, most people want to be good, and that seeing themselves as good is therefore one root of hope. Recent disasters have reinforced the truth that compassion, not plunder, is the natural response to tragedy and calamity. Our leading voices of hope remind us repeatedly that the most difficult challenges can forge great hope, and a better world.19

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But it is more than a sense. Sarah Stitzlein writes that hope is better understood as “a set of habits … most essentially a disposition toward the possibility of change for a betterment of all.” Stitzlein points out that a firm grounding in the real-life struggles of daily living while ardently striving for a better future is the ground upon which all educational projects are launched:

Having a disposition toward possibility highlights the human prerogative toward improvement instead of repeating past actions. Dewey viewed such a disposition to-


17Edelman, “An Implosion of Trust.”
18Victor E. Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006). See the postscript.
ward improving the world as worthwhile in and of itself. Seen as a productive disposition, such hopefulness orients us toward the possibility that change could occur as the result of intelligent action, thus engendering a tool for reconstructing oneself and the world around us.21

Others add that hope is essential for avoiding falling victim to despair as well as holding ourselves open to the possibility of good, for ourselves, and for our sisters and brothers.22

Hope has been called “the virtue of creative resolve—the fundamental commitment to finding creative solutions to what appear to be impossible problems.”23

Even today, respect for humanity is considered by many to be a fundamental moral imperative. Yet we are more likely to trust ourselves to do what is right than to trust each other. Where do we build compassion when we all experience the world uniquely, subjectively, when we have so many different perspectives to start with and choose from?

Compassion has been described as “the understanding of another’s experience as real and legitimate.” Yet a society that seems unable or unwilling to hold anyone accountable for police violence is a sign, among many others, of entrenched structural racism. The steady state of fear and vulnerability that White Americans can only imagine demonstrates our collective lack of moral imagination. Yet we have the opportunity to choose differently. The ongoing problem of gender inequity and the growing revelations of widespread sexual harassment and abuse of women by men are additional opportunities, if we can face them, for evolving ourselves and our culture.

Moving into spaces where we can recognize, appreciate, and empathize is where we may rediscover hope. “Our shared humanity is the source of a universal interpersonal hope for a world of compassion.”24

Examples of What Education Can Do

What, as educators, can we do to instill the possibility of being hopeful in a world that seems to be unraveling—in a world with more serious problems than ever, and a set of collective habits that make it difficult for us to even collectively define them, much less attempt solutions? Where do we find unity in a world where neoliberalism leads to an identity of “me, incorporated”? How can we overcome our “disaster mindsets”?

Where is our “moral compass”?

Dale Blyth reported in a recent workshop in Oakland, California, that the biggest challenge kids face in their social and emotional lives is in developing a positive identity. With the development of strength-based approaches in the expanding field of Social and Emotional Learning, it now seems within the reach of schools and classrooms to implement educational strategies that promote empathy, student agency, positive communication, conflict resolution, and teamwork.

Social and emotional learning strategies can teach the habits of hope and many schools are,

21Sarah Stitzlein, “Can Hope be Taught?” Retrieved from
22Mark Bernier, “What is the Role and Value of Christian Hope?” Retrieved from
23Nicole Hassoun, “Can Hope Help Us Overcome Obstacles to Doing What We Should?” Retrieved from
24Adrienne M. Martin, “What should I Hope from You?” Retrieved from
thankfully, finding ways to use them. These can provide a vision of compassion and excellence towards which the entire school community can aspire.

There are numerous resources to assist in this process. Models to improve school climate and culture are available and some have been proven effective when well implemented. Global education programs, restorative justice practices, positive conflict resolution techniques, anti-bullying programs, cultural literacy, mindfulness and meditative practices, service learning, maker spaces, peer-assistance programs, wilderness education, the arts—these are only some of the tools that are making a difference in many schools across the United States, even as I write.

Of course, with so many potential choices, community receptivity and norms are critical design considerations. Yet even in communities that may seem to be resistant to such programs, strategic and creative approaches can often succeed. For example, “leadership development” is generally a non-controversial way of entering the world of social and emotional learning.

As educators, it is important to understand the economic, cultural, historical, social, psychological, and political forces that are driving our world. Some positive forces that are marginal right now might yet be nurtured to bring about the next great transformation of society. Other forces, currently dominant, are part of a dysfunctional pattern that warrants caution and strategies of mitigation. Both have their roots in our history. Increasingly, neoliberalism and its effects are being seen as a failed ideology.²⁵

We, and our children, deserve better.

A Distant Mirror: The Axial


Connection

In 1953, Karl Jaspers wrote The Origin and Goal of History. Jaspers described a period from around 800 B.C. to approximately 300 B.C. during which a transformation in consciousness occurred in disparate parts of the world. People in diverse cultures were frustrated by warfare, conditions of slavery, despotism, violence, and the troubled course of history. Jaspers called this the “Axial Age,” as he saw it as a historical turning point, fueled by a dissatisfaction with the status quo and a yearning for a better world.

Over 2,000 years ago, the Axial Age witnessed spontaneous leaps in understandings about how we should strive to live. A new sense of individual consciousness arose, as well as the birth of empathy and the appreciation of how our actions affect others. It included the dawning of self-reflection, individuality, and striving towards living virtuously.

The formulation of the Golden Rule came about almost spontaneously in far different corners of the globe. With it came a new moral sensibility to peoples from China, Greece, North Africa, India, and the Mediterranean. This contributed to the forging of new relationships, leading to a virtual explosion of travel, trade, and the mixing of cultures.²⁶

Today, while we struggle with loneliness and isolation, we are also experiencing the profound silt of living in a globally connected world. This growing recognition of our interconnectedness is emerging in every field, from environmentalism to quantum physicists, from cosmology to evolutionary biology, and, of course, in and through the interweaving of the world through communications.

There is a growing appreciation that we belong deeply to this world and to each other.

And this connectivity may, indeed, be more real than our feelings of separation. Religion and spirituality are being transformed again. We are reviving the profound pre-axial age of earthiness and connection to our bodies. But instead of experiencing them at the tribal level, this shift is now occurring globally. We are discovering our interconnections. At the same time, we are not losing sight of the transcendent journey of the individual, now joined with the group.  

We are living at the beginning of a period of quantum leaps in understanding and insight. Concurrently, it is important to remember the dysfunction in the world that we are witnessing is not new. It has always been operating, and we have had many glimpses of it throughout history. What is new is that it is now being revealed, and we have the senses to see and hear clearly, more than ever before.

The two are deeply connected. Seeing with depth and clarity, listening to each other, and speaking with our hearts and minds, just might lead us to a place where we can better imagine who and how we can be, separately and together.

*When not busy with raising three teenagers, writing, meditating, cultivating non-virtual and virtual relationships, working hard to earn hope when for many despair is on the rise, David promotes 21st century learning for the California Department of Education. His views are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of his employer.*

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