

Learning and Dreaming Together through Social Uncertainty

Intro

We feel the uncertainty of these times. We wonder about ways of learning that are centered upon uncertainty, that do not hide from challenges we face. Institutions of higher learning have promised never-ending progress based on reason and science, but today we are unsure if this is real, or desirable. Rather than modeling education around a heroic narrative of individuals overcoming challenges, towards unquestioning progress, we think about how learning can be oriented towards learning together in difference. By facing it, we wonder how uncertainty can be embraced, or, at worst, how we can avoid panic around uncertainty. For this reason, we created an experiment, "Learning and Dreaming Together through Uncertainty." The experiment of "Learning and Dreaming..." was to host a collective overnight dream-in that asked its participants to focus on the emotional fragility of uncertainty and how experimental social and education practices could deal differently with this uncertainty.

When we get into the matter of uncertainty, we think about several aspects of it. On the one hand, there is the individual feeling and thinking self that may feel constitutionally fraught by self doubts and a sense of personal uncertainties. Then we have external impulses that normally help us orient ourselves within the world regardless of our own constitution, that because of the state of our world may or may not be stable. It is this second kind of uncertainty that we think about when we ask about living and dreaming through uncertain times. Among these uncertain things are social relations between people that are mundane and overarching, which constitute social and cultural

assumptions around how we should individually and collectively be—despite the actual state of ecological, economic, psychological affairs.

Turning toward education, we see how learning is evermore oriented toward a unipolar notion of “progress” or “development,” determined by individual mastery, market competition and profit. This is not what the world needs right now. The educational model that holds sway within most schools replicates a business as usual attitude, perpetuating the individual and systemic that brought us to this point of severe uncertainty. We ask instead if higher education could make space for collective practices of critical generosity, reciprocity, respect, and togetherness? Can it hold space for social learning around how to hold each other through uncertainty?

In preparing for this pedagogical experiment, some of the question that we considered were:

How might we collaboratively deal with uncertainties, as a prerequisite for any kind of learning process?

What is social practice for, if it does not actually help us socially work through and care for our collective dreams?



How would we like it to feel in the learning and caring space we share?



How do we develop capacities for sitting with discomfort, of feeling overwhelmed, anxious or rudderless—when facing uncertain times?

What are our commitments to ourselves and others through uncertainty? That is, what are our ideals for our being human despite the difficulties that we may face?

Below is a skit that we wrote between the Voice of Higher Education and its alternative. The skit was an introductory text to the dream-in, and was used to focus the attendees on the institutional question of how we might learn together through uncertainty.

Skit

Voice of Higher Education: The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has sent along a brief that requires higher education institutions to review current educational practices. They are asking different stakeholders to participate in conversations around education. For this reason, we invited you to this meeting. We are hoping to have an open and frank dialog. What are your specific concerns around the state of education today?

Voice of an Other Education: Ok, if that's what you want. The first question that comes to my mind is, why is institutionalized education failing us?

Voice of Higher Education: What do you mean?

Voice of an Other Education: Our current system of Higher Education is unable to meet the actual social challenges we are experiencing.

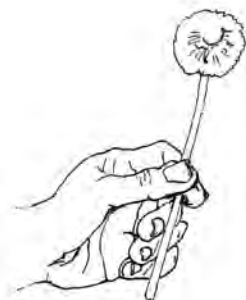
Voice of Higher Education: Oh?!?

Voice of an Other Education: It's about the way that you insist we teach, how we are asked to address climate change, extreme weather conditions, right-wing populist government... the glacier ice spilling into the ocean, rising water levels... pandemic. You know, global crises.

Voice of Higher Education: Yes, these are things we study. I don't follow you.

Voice of an Other Education: We are speaking about the suffering and the anxiety we feel right now about all these things—pain that is ignored by your idea that this is a distant reality. It is all happening here and now, and is the result of the damage done by choices made by the best educated among us. This is where you are failing.

Voice of Higher Education: Ok, so you want to focus



1. Nana Adusei-Poku, Iris Schutten, Roger Teeuwen, and Peter Troxler, "Social Design as a Political Act: Position Paper Social Practices WdKA," Beyond Social (website), 2017, https://beyond-social.org/wiki/index.php/Social_Design_as_a_Political_Act.

on the apocalypse—on unprecedented challenges in unprecedented times. And on how to meet those challenges in order to move forward?

Voice of an Other Education: Uhr, no, I'd really rather not. I'm not interested in this modernist fantasy of forward. And this 'we can fix it' mentality. Rather, I'd like to tend to the frayed but life-sustaining social relations that will hold us through the uncertainty of these unprecedented times.

Voice of Higher Education: I still don't understand. We are doing this innovative work. Take, for example, the art academy where we are currently speaking together. In this art school, these are our fields. And in these artistic and social practice skills, these are our practices.

2. Ibid.

Voice of an Other Education: What are you talking about?

Voice of Higher Education: Your concerns are what we've identified as the "urgent issues" for study and practice in 21st century arts and design. And that these are not just themes to be addressed and reflected upon, but they redefine the "very way artists, designers and educators work" through the emerging field of social practice.¹

Voice of an Other Education: Highly evocative words, like a battle cry. But how do you think of it as a practice? What is your understanding of social practice?

Voice of Higher Education: Social practice is a discipline where "art and design projects become direct interventions in society and politics," focusing on addressing "wicked societal or environmental issues."²

Voice of an Other Education: So by your measure, social practice focuses on urgent matters in urgent times?

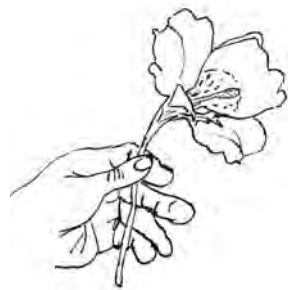
Voice of Higher Education: Yes, we ask "What can social art and design do to meet these unprecedented global challenges?" How can social practitioners be innovators and change-makers, by engaging directly with complex societal issues? Issues that are so

complex that they require co-creation with non-artistic fields and audiences.³ 3. Ibid.

Voice of an Other Education: You can do this while also graduating business students who will become managers at Shell Oil, designers who will greenwash Airbus, and HR managers at ABN AMRO. What if what you offer is nothing more than a transdisciplinary Swiss-army knife for facilitating and managing financial growth? In this model, a social practice is just one tool in a toolset to meet “global challenges” and “societal needs” as defined by the Higher Ed Complex and its capitalist imperatives.

Voice of Higher Education: That’s a funny way of phrasing it, but yes. We can do this, with the right data, the right plan, the right policy, the right expert, and the right methodology for societal development. We need more skill sets, strategies, and tools.

Voice of an Other Education: This is the thinking that got us into the mess in the first place! This problem-oriented approach to something that is, at its root, problematic. By trying to offer solutions while at the same time offering present and future generations a promise of moving forward you are bypassing the systemic causes inherent in business as usual. I hear you say: “Don’t worry, we got this.” We have a way out of this mess. We created the problem, but we will solve it. It is also as though you are saying that in order to build a better world, we must essentially destroy it.



Voice of Higher Education: I don’t get it.

Voice of an Other Education: It’s as though you are saying that in order to build a better world, we must first completely destroy the Amazon Rainforest because we can then devise innovative reforestation programs... The way I see it, there is an emergency in our systems of learning, and not in what we are learning about.

Your approach loves symptoms and hates root causes. You keep on making the same mistakes. We keep on putting bandaids over festering wounds. Time and

again. Because you are afraid to look deeply into those wounds. Because that wound is us, we are wounded. And this band-aiding numbs us to the actual realities of what we are supposed to be addressing.

Voice of Higher Education: So what would you have me do? Nothing? Give up hope? Binge-watch Netflix in my underwear eating Cheetos?

Voice of an Other Education: How about we deal with uncertainty as a prerequisite for a learning process? Can we hold onto that rather than just paper over challenges so that “other sectors” can get on with their business?

Voice of Higher Education: And what does this mean in concrete terms, for arts education?

Voice of an Other Education: It means that we are not interested in petro-capitalism's “green economy” that allows for more of the same consumption, as well as violence and inequality, but with less guilt. We are interested in how to learn and live within uncertainty. We are interested in deepening relations and developing a vocabulary for relationality. We want to sit with difference and not feel that we must either run from it or destroy it... by having the strength to ask together: How are you feeling? How are you doing? We also acknowledge the limitations of our own agency. Like, what can we actually affect? What might I really be able to solve?

Let's deal with this.

What is a social practice if not actually caring and working through the social capacity suggested in our dreams?

Voice of Higher Education: Are you talking sitting together and holding hands, and discussing our feelings? Some kind of peace-love-and-understanding kumbaya scenario?

Voice of an Other Education: No. We do not want the same kind of toxic positivity you've always offered.

Voice of Higher Education: I mean in actual practice,

what would you have us do? How should we teach? What do we need to learn?

Voice of an Other Education: How about holding a space for long processes of relation-building based on trust, respect, reciprocity and accountability, and through difficulties? For building the capacity for resiliency for holding difficulty while also building the capacity to dream collectively. Put that on your recruitment brochure.

Voice of Higher Education: But it is unethical to tell students that we cannot offer any clear economic pathways and financial outcomes. Or even a foreseeable future.

Voice of an Other Education: And it's unethical to offer students false promises or empty platitudes. Education should be about supporting people to face the world in its full spectrum. The "good, the bad, the ugly, the broken, and the messed up."⁴ And to acknowledge our own complicity in systemic, historical, and ongoing harm and unsustainability so as to stop it from repeating itself. This is the benefit you can offer them. You can also tell them about the limits of this education, that we can only do so much to correct the generations of harm we have caused for the world. Not to absolve ourselves of it, but rather, to be honest.

Voice of Higher Education: But this goes against our ideals, and the financial reality that we've constructed education as a highway of prosperity-as-progress? Our promises, our strategic planning, our doing, our making for a better future?

Voice of an Other Education: Look, we are at a crossroads where we have to start to learn from the ruins of modernity. We should understand what needs to be activated through relational change rather than technical or solution-oriented change for distraction's sake.

I'm curious, where is this conversation sitting right now in your body?

Voice of Higher Education: [thinks for a bit though feeling annoyed decides to play along] Well, there's anger and my sense of righteousness. I'm thinking to myself,

4. Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity's Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2021), 121-122.



was really sick. And it was awful. It was really hard.

5. In writing this script, we have been inspired by the speculative dystopian fiction scenario Education 2048 by the collective Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures (GDTF), the book *Hospicing Modernity* by Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, Resmaa Menakem's work on somatic abolitionism, and Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's work on the undercommons, among many others. See: Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective, "Education 2048 version 2," Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures (website) <https://decolonialfutures.net/portfolio/education-2048-v2/>; Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (London: Penguin UK, 2021); Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (London: Minor Compositions, 2013).

Additionally, some of the statements made by the Voice of Higher Education were directly, and somewhat irreverently, lifted from "Position Paper WdKA Social Practices: Design as a Political Act," a mission statement written in 2017 for the Social Practices department at the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam. This text was revised in a collective writing process undertaken by the teaching community in the Social Practices study programme at the WdKA. Renamed *In Search of Otherwise: (A) positional Paper Social Practices*, the co-writers ask: "What are the possibilities of living and learning differently?"

See: Sumia Jaama and Michelle Teran, et al., *In Search of Otherwise: (A) positional Paper Social Practices*, Research Center WdKA (website), 2022, <https://research.wdka.nl/index.php/news-activities/in-search-of-otherwise-apositional-paper-social-practices/>.

"this is not right!" I feel frustration, and then denial—that everything is and will be alright. And then I get defensive. Now I feel nothing but fear in the pit of my stomach. It's still there.

Voice of an Other Education: And what if we were to start to work with this feeling in the pit of your stomach. It's difficult, discomfoting, it's complex but can I ask you to stay with this feeling? As somehow a shared, communal or common experience with individual expression. And with this as what we learn from, this is where we act from. Within uncertainty, within the burgeoning cracks of the business as usual.

Voice of Higher Education: I am still getting visions of everybody standing in a circle hugging each other. Isn't that a little too naive? Too kumbaya?

Voice of an Other Education: Oh come on! I'm fucking terrified and you just said you are as well. I'd rather not have to do this.

Social practice begins with teaching and learning together. By design, our learning space is not naive. We need schools that do not assume neutrality, as yours does. Your dream that you can manage the world—its climate and people—has screwed us. For us all to learn together, you—and this also means we—need to acknowledge your and our deep entanglement and complicity with the worst of the world. In your "Higher Education," social practice is an elite science or just stuff that women and brown people do. You have to circle this square before we talk. Social practice is what we all do to relate to one another, but your "educational highway-as-progress" screws this all up.⁵

[END]