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Educating for Action: A Curriculum for Social Activists

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BOOK REVIEW

EDUCATING FOR ACTION: A CURRICULUM FOR SOCIAL ACTIVISTS

Roger Hopkins. Brill, 2022, 234 pages.

Educating for Action acts as a how-to guide for adult educators interested in learning how to inspire and train students in social activism. Hopkins describes the need for this kind of activist education as a way of acknowledging and countering the many neoliberal barriers that prevent us from achieving effective democratic engagement in our communities. This activist education is demonstrated through Hopkins' Critical Social Studies course that he developed and facilitated to a group of adults in Wales who were motivated towards social activism. We are often given snippets of dialogue between Hopkins and his students as they try to navigate the theoretical and practical barriers relevant to their potential work as social change leaders.

As for Hopkins himself, his previous book, *Empowering Education* (2013), similarly highlights his college-level course on community development to demonstrate the need for explicit education in the critical thinking skills and group development processes necessary for people to combat the social issues of our time. His dedication to this educational field is obvious, as are his political views that decry the detrimental effects neoliberalism continues to have, not only on socio-economic policies, but also on our way of knowing, our collective epistemology. He unequivocally connects the Reagan/Thatcher era politics and neoliberal capitalism to the transatlantic socio-political ills of today as best represented by Brexit and Trump. These modern issues exemplify the fundamentally undemocratic nature of neoliberalism that Hopkins is most opposed to and wishes to help combat through a focused education in social activism. Although the term 'radical democracy' is not used in the book, I believe Hopkins would land firmly in their camp due to his advocacy for grass roots collective action towards social justice based on democratic values. His emphasis on "many action groups working in concert across issues areas" (p. 105), typically galvanized around class struggle, would especially put him in line with Chantal Mouffe's concept of radical democracy and agonistic pluralism, which sees nonviolent conflict as an integral aspect of politics that should not be avoided or diminished but rather harnessed as a motivator for socio-political movements (DesRoches & Ruitenberg, 2018). Both Hopkins and Mouffe call for a redirecting of people's emotions toward political engagement and social activism.

The beginning chapters of the book are dedicated to exploring the political theories that establish this antithetical relationship between democracy and neoliberalism. Through the expertise of political theorists such as Hannah Arendt and Antonio Gramsci, the opposing forces of participatory democracy and a capitalist hegemony are established. Hopkins draws this theoretical connection to make it clear how important it is for students to understand

how these theories impact their way of thinking. His political advice to activists is to loudly, persistently, and publicly draw attention to the failures of neoliberal policies/policymakers. This again evokes a radical democracy viewpoint that would benefit with a more specific elucidation in the opening chapters to connect a more contemporary democratic theory (i.e. agonistic pluralism) with the likes of Arendt and Gramsci.

The middle chapters dive into the complex world of critical thinking with the many associated skills, dispositions, and models that train people's ability to think rationally. On an individual level, Hopkins very clearly articulates how an overreliance on common sense (heuristics) as a way of forming one's worldview can be easily exploited in today's "fake news" era to confuse and distract people from real issues. Hopkins advocates for practical critical thinking skills and dispositions to gain the critical consciousness needed to create authentic social change. Logic models (e.g. Cynefin Framework, Paul-Elder Model) and framing devices (rhetorical and linguistic) are presented in great detail with Hopkins' students again providing the praxis. Some may find this section of the book somewhat dry as the detail gets quite granular, but it goes to show the level of importance Hopkins places on explicitly teaching students how to effectively engage and communicate with others in ways that allow reason to prevail in contextually disparate and complex scenarios.

Hopkins, guided by the kind of community activism of Saul Alinsky, then engages his students in local issues of poverty that challenge the relevant systemic power dynamics as well as their own common sense biases. There is an urgency in these latter chapters of the book as "politics is taking on a very authoritarian aspect in many democracies" (p. 224). Hopkins' general call-to-arms is expressed in the following:

> A vibrant democracy needs more than just a voting public that sporadically engages in politics through elections, alongside political elites in parliament. It needs groups that help individuals experience what collective power can accomplish, from community organising to strong trade unions that build workplace power. (p. 219)

Hopkins contends that social activists need to subvert the influence of traditional power holders by utilizing (via online technology/social media) a less hierarchical form of "networked social action" capable of creating a new type of democratic action.

Although many of the goals presented in this book, such as the one just mentioned above, seem insurmountable, Hopkins effectively walks the delicate line between pessimism and hope. He makes it apparent how complex the issues we face are and how difficult it is to challenge the social and political forces of neoliberalism, but, at the same time, it is also apparent how real change is able to take hold. In quoting Jason Hickel, Hopkins explains where his hope comes from: "The key point…is that the neoliberal model was made – intentionally – by specific people. And because it was made by people, then it can be undone by people. It is not a force of nature, and it is not inevitable, another world is possible" (p. 222). Specifically, it was made by the wealthy and powerful to keep themselves wealthy and powerful, and must be undone by communities of people who are not just taught about the important issues and how the status quo is maintained, but are also taught the theories, skills, and methods necessary to engage politically and become social change leaders.

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