

Book Review

Out of the ruins: The emergence of radical informal learning spaces

Robert H Haworth & John M Elmore (editors)

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This book presents a collection of works written by leading radical and informal educational theorists and activists. The premise of the collection resides in the exploration and emergence of 'radical informal learning spaces' as alternatives to the political and social imaginaries of mainstream state schooling, which is characterised as an affiliate of the global corporate capitalist regime. Further, the collection offers some guideposts for the pedagogical route to a reimagined form of self-empowerment and participatory democracy.

Haworth's introduction outlines his personal journey of unease with the underlying motivations and mouldings of the mainstream educational institution and offers a distinction between education and learning which he discovered upon his introduction to punk discourse. Following, Haworth sets the scene with a call for a re-genesis of education, and a reorientation from the current educational goals of privatisation, hyper-individualisation and obedience of the working class in Western society, towards a radical openness that values critical reflection, dialogue and relationships. Haworth calls for wide scale questioning of the processes and ideas that uphold systems

of dominance and drive us to embrace ideologies and systems of control (e.g., working class people in the US voting against universal health care), and education's complicity in this process.

Many of the authors use the term 'deschool', which refers to a conscious deconstruction of the assumptions and ideologies inherited from the mainstream education system, of note: hierarchical thinking and acceptance of authority and dominance. This is an especially important process in adult learning spaces, as awareness of 'moulding' and 'conditioning' is critical to understanding and challenging the socio-political conditions that maintain intersectional class, gender, racial and environmental inequalities. Section 1 of *Out of the Ruins* titled 'Critiques of Education' has a theoretical focus on important philosophical and age-old questions regarding the historical and enduring purpose, motivations, and interests of hegemonic, state-ordered education. Followingly, Section 2: 'Constructing a Theoretical Framework for Educational Praxis' offers a range of strategic frameworks for facilitating and maintaining radical learning spaces across different fields of study. However, the transformative power of *Out of the Ruins* lies in the last two sections named 'The Emergence of Radical Informal Learning Spaces "Using the Institutional Space without Being of the Institution"' and 'Of the Streets and the Coming Educational Communities'. These sections offer an extension of anti-capitalist system critiques of neoliberal education institutions, by depicting a range of radical adult learning spaces both within, outside and against institutional contexts in the Global North. Those participating in adult education and pursuing horizontal pedagogy, teacher, and student alike, will find great value in this collection as a source of both inspiration, wisdom, and warning of the limitations for future educational projects and encounters. Despite the pearls of wisdom scattered throughout each of the chapters in *Out of the Ruins*, I have reviewed one or two chapters from each section in the collection that I feel offer significant value to those working in adult education, across formal and informal settings.

The Critiques of Education section consists of two accordant pieces that take a stark philosophical stance against the market-based orientation of education and claim the widely held notion of education as a benevolent force, is a self-subordinating illusion. However, the two authors arrive at vastly different conclusions as to how an educational re-genesis could emerge. I have chosen to focus on the more optimistic of the two; John Elmore's 'Miseducation of the Authoritarian Mind. This piece outlines how the historical evolution of compulsory education has been constructed to serve the interests of the elite and mould an obedient future labour force. To reinforce this point, Elmore describes two (not mutually exclusive) authoritarian personality types that are endorsed in neoliberal classrooms; the sadistic authoritarian, who pursues domination and control, and the passive-authoritarian, a submissive character that aims to become part of a larger unit, to receive commands and not carry a burden of responsibility. Both characters are motivated by a fear of loneliness, inferiority, and powerlessness, that is ingrained through the microcosm of the compulsory classroom. Elmore alludes that liberatory education and radical pedagogy can act to increase critical consciousness is the most direct counter to authoritarian ways of knowing in wider society that maintain power structures, to 'lead the way out of the ruins' (p.33).

'From the Unlearned Un-man to a Pedagogy without Moulding' in the Theoretical Framework for Educational Praxis section, Rhiannon Firth and Andrew Robinson make a potent contribution to adult learning in the collection, through their deconstruction of 'moulding' in education as a process by which desired skills are imparted to students 'in a direction desired by the knowing subject', followed by a proposition of alternatives to this widely adopted education model. The authors postulate that 21st Century educational institutions have their roots in 'nationalist projects', using the example of universities advertising 'graduate attributes' as a product for the consumption of industry.

The third and fourth sections of *Out of the Ruins* present

a diverse portfolio of experiences and models of ‘radical informal learning’ projects from a range of participant, facilitator, and founder perspectives. These examples not only present radical ‘deschooling’ alternatives to the standardised colonial model of education, but also include honest discussions about the foreseen and unforeseen limitations of the projects, often exacerbated by the internalised assumptions about education discussed in the first few chapters. Whilst I would love to explore all the works in this collection, such as Jeff Shantz’s ‘Anarchists against (and within) the Edu-Factory: The Critical Criminology Working Group’ which ‘espouses the benefits of the ‘free school’ movement, or Dana William’s ‘Teaching Anarchism by Practicing Anarchy: Reflections on Facilitating the Student Creation of a College Course’, this is beyond the scope of this review. Thus, I have selected two chapters that resonated with me, as a recent graduate of a post-graduate education course at the beginning of my teaching career, to evaluate their usefulness for adult education practitioners. The final two sections provide exceptional value to people and communities in adult education that are wanting to embrace the challenges of facilitating post-modern horizontal pedagogies and reject the commodification and standardisation of an education system that continues to serve elite interests.

Sarah Amsler’s ‘What Do We Mean When We Say ‘Democracy?’ Learning towards a Common Future through Popular Higher Education stands out among the chapters within the Theoretical Framework section, as it provides a deep analysis of the skeleton of the liberation of human flourishing, community building, and living with agentic assuredness. Further, this section discusses the role of higher education institutions to facilitate this societal transition; to first find a consensus on what is meant by true democracy, then practice participatory democracy as an antidote to capitalist, hyper individualist ways of knowing. Despite higher education’s traditions of critical pedagogy and radical thought, the colonisation of these institutions by capitalist rationalities has led to a contraction of access

that excludes many working classes from democratic spaces and transformative spaces that were once available. The question then becomes, how can we regenerate democratic possibilities within the modern day edu-factory? To respond to this question, Amsler draws on a case study; the Social Science Centre, a 'counter-capitalist learning space, an immanent critique of neoliberal education, and a contribution to the development of alternative forms of knowledge for democratising everyday life' (p.108) formed in response to defunding and neglect of the public library in a small English city. More specifically, Amsler unpacks the contents of an evening class that addressed the title question, and critically engages with the societal and pedagogical consequences of the students' diverse understandings of democracy, a concept that underpins the entire ethos of the project. The radically open but cooperatively governed character of the Social Science Centre practices democracy in three challenging ways. First, destabilising encounters and criticism are structured into the decision-making process and encouraged. Second, the centre insists on its members building cooperative relationships with others that are geographically, politically, and socially different. Lastly, the centre acknowledges that for people to understand the radical potential and people power of true democracy, the conditions for learning about democracy need to be democratised, as our democratic common sense has been distorted by our societal habits, privileges, inequities, and authoritarian conditioning.

In the penultimate section *Of the Streets and the Coming Educational Communities, 'What is Horizontal Pedagogy? A Discussion on Dandelions'* is a multi-authored annotated dialogue of a prefigurative educational experiment that transpired at the New York Occupy University. The project aimed to work against 'neoliberal-capitalist relations of [knowledge] production' by democratically constructing a curriculum in response to the question 'What is Horizontal Pedagogy?', using traditional activist methods of participatory facilitation. This piece offers a powerful and insightful example of inclusive horizontal

pedagogy, that emphasises questions and the process of questioning, rather than answers, because ‘questions put into doubt the familiar, they create fissures in the familiar’. The participants all demonstrate a deep respect for the value and opportunity for growth and transformation that comes with uncertainty and use curiosity as a vehicle of learning. This approach meaningfully challenges many dominant institutional ways of knowledge production that place a higher value on objectivity and certainty as a way of increasing the trading and consumer capital of knowledge. As many informal adult education programs often have close ties to marginalised, oppressed groups, this chapter provides an inclusive example of how to empower individuals to control their own learning and facilitate spaces for true democracy where all voices can be heard.

In response to the increasingly one-size fits all model of education that serves to ‘mould’ individuals to be compatible with a globalised, classist, and capitalist society, *Out of the Ruins* highlights the socio-political danger of continuing the current education model and broadens the potential of education by giving detailed accounts of how to disrupt this system, and provide transformative, radical learning experiences that serve the interests of the people; not profit or power. Thus, this collection is of great value to facilitators in the adult learning space, as the narrative of the collection from critique to theoretical framework, to detailed accounts of alternative frameworks in practice, in both formal and informal settings, forces readers to deeply reflect on the urgency of change required. The authors’ collective and inclusive tones encourage readers to critically engage with the values, purpose and objectives of education, to locate the incompatibilities between personal and political motivations and interests in education, and understand that systemic, large-scale alternatives to the standard educational model will be required to meaningfully shift the orientation of 21st Century education, in order to equip people with the innovation, creativity, and resilience required to address 21st Century challenges. The honesty displayed by the authors regarding the limitations,

challenges, and difficulty of constructing and maintaining truly democratic learning and honouring the agency of diverse groups of people is of great value to anyone with progressive aspirations to facilitate authentic student-led educational experiences. Out of the Ruins' emphasis on non-hierarchical models of communication is upheld in each of the chapters, and various educational strategies for negotiating democratic participation are available for critical educational practitioners to freely adapt to and trial in their own context.