10 Propositions for a Radical Pedagogy, or How To Rethink Value

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1. Study

Let classrooms be invitations for study, not knowledge consumption. Beware of the idea that certain things “must be covered.” Study, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney argue, is about creating dissonance. It’s about allowing learning to continue, rather than continuously cutting learning off in the name of what we’ve decided, in advance of our coming together, is worthy of being called knowledge. Don't look too hard for the through-thread. Don't worry too much about drawing a line. Make learning a weave.

2. Start in the Middle

When we make study the way we enter into the pact of collective learning, we must unlearn the habit of stopping thought in order to start it again. Think of all of the times you’ve entered a classroom where a lively discussion is taking place only to close it down. We, teachers, tend to stage the classroom that way, marking our entrance as the start of learning. What is lost in this gesture? What is left unheard?
“Refuse to call the class to order,” Moten and Harney suggest. Recognize learning’s fragility. Learn to listen from the middle of the many conversations. Connect in the rhythm. Think of it as a soundscape:

when we listen to music, we must refuse the idea that music happens only when the musician enters and picks up an instrument; music is also the anticipation of the performance and the noises of appreciation it generates and the speaking that happens through and around it, making it and loving it, being in it while listening. (Halberstam in Harney & Moten 2013: 9)

The soundscape of learning is full of inklings which reside below the threshold of actual perception. Think of the site for learning as encompassing what it cannot quite articulate, and listen to what that sounds like, even if you can’t quite hear it. It makes a difference. “[W]hen we refuse the call to order – the teacher picking up the book, the conductor raising his baton, the speaker asking for silence, the torturer tightening the noose – we refuse order as the distinction between noise and music, chatter and knowledge, pain and truth” (Halberstam in Harney & Moten 2013: 9).

3. Think Beyond the Institution

A pedagogical process that starts in the middle has much more difficulty discerning who is doing the teaching and who is doing the learning. When this distinction is eroded, the class has always already begun. The thinking seen as a prerequisite by the institution is not here what is at stake, though it likely is being learned, by and by. The institution may provide a site, but learning cannot but exceed it. There is no way to hold learning to curriculum.

Value what is in excess of curriculum, the unknowable as heard in the interstices of the uneasy soundscape which is the ever overflowing classroom. Listen here, where value is still in the forming.
4. Beyond Value

Value at the university is measured in credits. With each credit comes a fee. For some this fee is exorbitant, leading to the vicious cycle of debt and credit. For others it is financially viable, and so debt feels kept at bay. But one way or another debt is at work. It haunts us, and it exceeds us, and it sustains, like the gift it is at its underside.

There is a direct relationship between credits and the value of education in the accredited academic institution. How we succeed depends on how many credits we accumulate. This accumulation makes clear demands on how learning is lived, and defined. With the accumulation of credit comes the calling to order. There is a way to learn, material to be covered, assignments to be graded. Value is squarely tied to use: part of the lesson we learn (if we succeed) is that our value coincides with our ability to be called to order.

The student in the undercommons resists this call to order. But she doesn’t do it in the mode of critique. Her no is affirmative. She is eager to learn, an eagerness that leads her elsewhere than toward the call to order, or the ordering of her credit(s). In fact, the call barely registers, she is so busy learning. This student is a bad debtor: she won’t let credit run her life. She has real debt, she struggles with it, holding not one but two part-time jobs, and yet she refuses to give in. She barely hears the call of credit.

[T]he student has a habit, a bad habit. She studies. She studies but she does not learn. If she learned they could measure her progress, establish her attributes, give her credit. But the student keeps studying, keeps planning to study, keeps running to study, keeps studying a plan, keeps elaborating a debt. The student does not intend to pay. (Harney & Moten 2013: 62)

Who is this student who (un)learns, in debt, beyond credit? She is the student who reads and speaks and dreams her studies. She is the student you learn from, as long as you are willing to similarly resist the call to order. She is the one who
takes a stand wherever she is and does not discriminate between degrees and shades of learning. The classroom is only one of the sites in which she invents and explores. She is the student who remains “beyond interest,” in a field of relation that doesn’t accept the vicious cycle of debt and credit, who understands in advance that debt will always exceed the capacity for it to be repayed, who knows that learning cannot be encapsulated within a narrow understanding of interest demarcated in advance of the giving. She thinks of learning as a gift.

She knows the debt far exceeds the credit, and she is proud to be indebted to learning. She is indebted and she honours the debt. The more she learns the more indebted she is. This is a learning that refuses credit, that refuses the cycle that pretends our bases can be covered in advance. “Interest the students! The student can be calculated by her debts, can calculate her debts with her interests. She is in sight of credit, in sight of graduation, in sight of being a creditor, of being invested in education, a citizen” (62).

She just isn’t interested in what credit promises. She prefers the uneasy reciprocity of debt unpayable and gifts beyond return. This doesn’t mean that she doesn’t pay her debts. She just knows that debt and credit must not be so easily aligned, that the alignment of debt and credit discredits the gift. She doesn’t want to quantify interest. She’ll take the credit, but she won’t work for it. She’ll work despite being told what is worth and not worth knowing. She will resist the idea that learning can be captured by the interests of a discipline. She will resist discipline. “The student with credit can privatize her own university. The student can start her own NGO, invite others to identify their interests, put them on the table, join the global conversation, speak for themselves, get credit, manage debt” (62). This student doesn’t want a private university. In fact, privatization, as she understands it, just produces more need for credit. And so she invents other kinds of collectivities, participating in undercommons as they emerge.
5. Beyond Evaluation

She is hard to evaluate, this student who resists credit. The institution finds her slippery: she does her work, even gets the credit, but this doesn't seem to be what motivates her. She knows how to write a good paper, how to cover the necessary bases, and yet when she sticks to this approach she finds herself sinking into a black hole. Something else has to be at stake, and it is this that really motivates her.

How to teach such a student who learns beyond, who learns despite evaluation? The student who feels so strongly and who follows the feeling? The student who isn’t afraid of friction, who adapts not only to the question, but to what remains unarticulated but not unheard? “To work today is to be asked, more and more, to do without thinking, to feel without emotion, to move without friction, to adapt without question, to translate without pause, to desire without purpose, to connect without interruption” (Harney & Moten 2013: 87).

6. Pragmatics of the Useless

A pedagogy engaged with a pragmatics of the useless invents value in the learning. It does not decide in advance what is useful. In fact, it is skeptical of the very idea that we should know in advance where learning will take us. The whole conversation about the future, about jobs and security reeks of a power politics. Isn’t this the call to order? How could we possibly know what will be of value in a time yet to be invented? Even capital doesn’t pretend to know this.

A pragmatics of the useless is dedicated to uselessness, to practices that have not yet been defined in accordance to value imposed from the outside. A pragmatics of the useless celebrates the fact that we do not know where a thought can take us. It delights in study for study’s sake.
A pragmatics of the useless is pragmatic in the sense that it is absolutely engaged with what is in the world, right now, and speculative in the sense that it is open to transformation by the potentializing force of where study can take us.

7. Making-Thinking

Value is often allied to what can be articulated. What of the forces in experience that are felt but remain ineffable? What of other ways of expressing that defy articulation? What of the soundscapes that move us more by their undertow than by their waves? Duchamp’s concept of the infrathin touches on this ineffable undertow in experience.

The infrathin cannot be generalized across iterations of its coming to be. It is exemplary. As Duchamp writes: “One can only give examples of it” (in de Duve 1991: 160). From Duchamp’s hand-written notes: “The warmth of a seat (which has just been left) is infra-thin (#4),” “Subway gates—The people / who go through at the very last moment / Infra thin—(9 recto),” “Velvet trousers - / their whistling sound (in walking) by / brushing of the 2 legs is an / infra thin separation signaled / by sound. (it is not an infra thin sound) (#9 verso),” “Difference between the contact / of water and that of / molten lead for ex, /or of cream. / with the walls of its / own container moved around the liquid. … this difference between two contacts is infra thin. (#14)” (Perloff 2002: 101).

The infrathin is interested in what is backgrounded in experience, yet still makes a difference. Usually, what can actually be apprehended – the actual share of experience in the making – is the measure of use-value. What is not actually included in the occasion of experience, in the event, is considered useless. This unactualized share is not only too difficult to describe, it is unmeasurable. How could it possibly be evaluated?

Yet it is this very unmeasurability that gives experience its value. The student knows this, and this is why she learns everywhere she goes. In fact, the university is only one of many sites where she experiences the welling force of
the undercommons. Sometimes she even wonders whether the undercommons
doesn’t have a stronger undertow away from the walls of the academic
institution. But she persists because she is a life-long learner and she loves the
idea of there being a site dedicated to pedagogy. She knows, from her experience
of valuing the edgings into experience, that there are emergent collectivities even
in the most rigid of systems. And so she finds ways to keep encountering the
speculative share of experience, exploring how it colours the event in its
pragmatism. Like all life-long learners, she knows about the magic of the verge.

8. New Forms of Knowledge

The verge is a new form of knowledge that’s been there all along. The only
reason it hasn’t stood out is that it activates a kind of value that resists
evaluation. We just couldn’t see it, we were so busy with evaluations. This might
be to its advantage: it still has the potential for creating new forms of value, new
useless ways of valuing experience in the making.

If we look up from our evaluations, we may note: thought was always
transversal, the classroom always a site for learning at the verge. What we need
is not a new classroom, not new students, but new techniques to orient
perception.

To think study transversally involves a rethinking of the concept of thought
itself. Thought is reoriented toward the incipiency of the event at hand, toward
the inquiry of study, refraining from delimiting it to existing academic definitions
of intellectuality. Where else does thinking happen?

We must also undo thought of its dependence on the human subject. Thought is
not first in the mind. It is in the bodying. And the bodying is always in an
ecology of practices. In the ecology of practices where it is not the mind that
speaks, what emerges is not a subject-centered narrative but an account of how
thought moves, how it moves us, and how it moves the world. A practice of
collective learning is about the movement of thought, engaging thought at the

immanent limit where it is still fully in the act. Learning happens through us, with us. We are bearers of thought in the sense that it is carried along. We move in this carrying, and this carrying moves us.

9. Beyond Method

A methodological approach begins to unravel if it asks what knowledge does. What knowledge does cannot be packaged. There is no call to order for thought in the act. Study seeps and leaks and shifts and bounces.

As study, what thought can do is begin to attend to the appetitions activated in the everyday, taking the thinking-in-the-act as rigorous on its own speculative terms. Thought now begins to coincide with the most creative definition of philosophy, philosophy that asks how, and what else? No method will ever assist philosophy in this enterprise of thinking in the act, nor will any method be an adequate mantle for the dissonance of thought’s soundscape. Each thinking in the act must invent its own practices for learning, its own techniques for carrying. In study, what we seek is not the homogenization of thinking-doing but the creation of conditions for encountering the operative transversality of difference at the heart of all living.

10. Research-Creation

At the SenseLab we’ve called this activity of thinking-doing research-creation. Research-creation, as we experiment with it, is study. We have asked: How can the rethinking of how knowledge is created in the context of artistic practice become an opening to thinking philosophy itself as a practice? How, following Gilles Deleuze, might a resituating of research-creation as a practice that thinks provide us with the vocabulary to take seriously that “philosophical theory is itself a practice, just as much as its object”? “It is no more abstract than its object. It is a practice of concepts, and we must judge it in light of the other practices with which it interferes” (Deleuze 1989: 280; translation modified).
What research-creation does is ask us to engage directly with a process which, in many cases, will not be or cannot be articulated in language. This is the paradox: that philosophy does want to find words for thought in the act. The ongoing work of the creative collaboration that is research-creation involves honouring the dissonance of the push-pull of the textures and movements of practice that refuse naming, feeling the reverberations of that which cannot quite be put into words, while activating, in writing, the infrathin that sounds as much as it says.

Research-creation does not need new methods. What it needs is a re-accounting of what writing can do in the process of thinking-doing. This involves experimenting with listening at the verge, a practice that engages with the not-yet at the heart of learning. This is radical pedagogy: the commitment to the creation of practices that foreground how learning creates its own value.

Works Cited


