

Book Review

Teaching Defiance: stories and strategies for activist educators

Michael Newman; foreword by Stephen Brookfield (2006). San Francisco: John Wiley and Sons, Inc. 300 pp.

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Teaching Defiance, as Michael Newman notes in the introduction, owes its origins to a set of lecture and class notes he prepared for a course on the topic of “challenging the authority” of management. Designed for experienced trade union activists, and to be held under the auspices of the Australian Trade Union Training Authority (TUTA), the course was never actually taught. Luckily for us, upon his retirement from teaching in 2001, Newman has taken the topic up again, and expanded its purpose to, as he puts it, “... investigate how adult educators working in any context can make the teaching of defiance not secondary nor incidental nor just one of central aims, but central to our work” (p. 13) [emphasis added].

However, Newman does much more. Along with this investigation is included a survey of the radical adult education pitched to union and community adult educators, discussions on Habermas and Freire among many other influential and not always mutually compatible theorists, a workshop outline for teaching critical self-reflexivity, pragmatic tips on how to manipulate the outcome of meetings, and a lot of other things besides. Thus, its appeal is rather broad – from labour educators, to teachers, to engaged citizens, in general. In particular, those such as myself who found *The Third Contract* (1993) both intellectually engaging as well as profoundly practical with its mix of personal anecdotes, glosses of important theorists, and practical teaching know-how, will immediately recognize and appreciate a similar eclectic approach taken within this book. Those who prefer “just the facts” type of accounts, however, may enjoy it somewhat less.

Although the work is rather diffuse (Newman himself labels it “discursive” (Newman, 2006, p. 245), it is, with a few minor exceptions, more or less true to its stated central purpose. What Michael Newman seeks to do here is to make the case for the possibility, the benefit and finally, even the moral necessity of activist educators to facilitate the transformation of the unfocused anger of the oppressed into what Newman terms “defiance”, or a state of constructive and creative rebelliousness (p. 61). But not only that, he also intends to show us how.

The book is divided into five parts. In Part One, Newman unambiguously positions himself as being heavily influenced by Marx, existentialists such as Sartre and Camus, and by Habermas (p. 4), and sets the stage for what follows. In Part Two, he begins making the distinction between unfocused anger and rebelliousness and defiance, drawing from historical anecdotes and exemplars as well as social psychological theory (p. 53). Defiance as a type of critical reflection and opposition to “Gramscian hegemony” (p. 71) begins to take shape here, with the “enemy” defined in Freire’s words as those who prefer “the dead to the living, the static to the dynamic, the future as a repetition of the past rather than as a creative venture” (Freire, 1972a, p. 72-73, as quoted in Newman, p. 72), with anger to be used as a focused tool for radical change. In Part Three, he begins to deal directly with the question: “As activist educators, how can we inspire

rebelliousness?" (p. 40). Key to doing so, he argues, is the artful use of "rational discourse" to encourage people to take up their ability to "choose otherwise", or to conceive of possibilities outside of the dominant discourse (p. 75). This part is perhaps the most diffuse of the book, with a how-to for practical union contract negotiation next to a discussion of how to employ dialogue drawing on the works of Paulo Freire and Paula Allman (p. 155). At this stage in the work, *Teaching Defiance* seems to be a grab bag of practical tactics and critical self reflection exercises (p. 153), but with no underlying unity, or at least one is that is not readily apparent. Part Four continues in the same vein, with anecdotes and workshop suggestions to "facilitate insight" (p. 181), but moving towards a discussion of teaching action through the use of critical incidents, and by breaking it down into its different types (i.e., peaceful, confrontational, violence (p. 224-225), and domains of action (i.e., community, social, and political action (p. 231-232). Finally, in Part Five, we turn to what is the most polemical part of this work. Here, through the deft use of stories, literature, and even poetry (p. 281), Newman discusses how teachers can facilitate moral reflection and learning among students, making an ambivalent and provisional case for violent tactics in certain situations, and ending on a surprising note. In the last chapter, reminiscent once again of Freire (1989), Newman makes an impassioned and unabashed plea for both hate and love as motivators for action: "Hate for the hateful should be our motivating force. Love from the people we respect should be our goal, our guide, and our source of moral authority" (p. 285).

This is a rather difficult work to assess definitively since, as we have seen, it is a rather diffuse and personal work. It might be best thought of as the collected thoughts and wisdom of a thinker who, here as in his other works, is always a teacher first. For beginning activist educators looking for inspiration or pragmatic techniques to aid in their own teaching, or practiced ones becoming curious about the theoretical underpinnings and insights into their work, this is definitely worth a read. This would apply especially to academics frustrated by the passivity that the current seminar system seems to inculcate and those looking for advice and pointers from a master practitioner, such as Newman. Nonetheless, this may not be the work for those who prefer a more "academic" analysis and who disdain partisan polemics. For those, it might be best to look to writers such as Paula Allman (2001) and Stephen Brookfield (2005), who are not quite so discursive in their approaches.

As a teacher and activist, I appreciated the many useful and sometimes very illuminating anecdotes and theories as related herein. However, for those operating outside an institutional context, Newman's pedagogic strategies and tactics often seem to presume the teacher possessing a degree of formal authority and being able to draw on significant resources. These are two assumptions that are seldom safe to make about social movement work. Rather, the examples of both Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela seem to show that education within social movements is, by necessity, less about sharing narratives and role play, for instance, and more about teaching by your own example in whatever context you find yourself in. But for those working within institutional contexts, whether in academia, the nonprofit world, or the labour movement, this book is entirely relevant. This is a book rich in practice, theory, and moral inspiration. *Teaching Defiance* is a definite "must have" for the radical educator in all their myriad guises.

Colin Piquette
University of Alberta

References

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