
Stepping off the Well-trodden Path: is a wilder pedagogy possible?

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ABSTRACT This article sets out to explore alternative approaches to education, wilder approaches that seek to embrace the innate self-will of young people as a positive starting point for enlarging personal freedoms in education. These alternatives are presented as a rebuttal against educational practices that portray young people's native autonomy as an undesirable trait requiring discipline and subjugation. The article considers the opportunity for learning to be led by the senses, a provocation for deeper environmental relationships that underline the value of opportunities to develop kinship and equality with the more-than-human world. The appearance and development of wilder teaching practices in recent educational research literature underlines the increasing significance of rethinking pedagogy for a twenty-first-century world and this article seeks to draw attention to this growing philosophy of wild pedagogy. Paulo Freire's concept of education as a process of domestication is presented alongside the idea of wild pedagogy, with an introduction to the methodology of this wilder teaching practice and a plea for embracing the self-will of those involved both as learners and teachers. The article concludes with an invitation to turn aside from worn-out educational paths and go wild.

Introduction

What If Teaching Went Wild?

In 2004 Anthony Weston published 'What if Teaching Went Wild?', an article that progressed a proposal for a *wilder pedagogy*, a wilder teaching practice that sought to 'unsettle our deeply-felt sense of disconnection from the world' (Weston, 2004, p. 31). Weston, an environmental educator working in Canada, argued 'that almost by necessity, school cuts us off from the experience of a larger world, from natural rhythms, natural beings, more-than-human flows of knowledge and inspiration' (2004, p. 31). For many, school life, regardless of reported educational, environmental and social progress, continues to focus on

behaviour and discipline rather than these aforementioned 'natural rhythms, natural beings and more-than-human flows of knowledge'. Recent guidance issued by the Department for Education (DfE) in the United Kingdom recommended that teachers 'screen and search pupils, use reasonable force ... and discipline beyond the school gate' (DfE, 2015, p. 4) in order to impose civil behaviour seen to 'underpin effective education' (2015, p. 8).

Wild pedagogy is a refreshing approach to teaching that critiques this alignment between discipline and education as an insidious form of behaviour shaping. It suggests that external coercion, dependency and enculturation are administered in many teacher-led encounters and that this education through domination ultimately results in a subtle, yet detectable process of domestication (AbdelRahim, 2014). The effects of this domestication are seen to have serious implications for the integrity and health of the individual (Griffiths, 2013), of their capacity to think, critique and create (Hood, 2014), whilst also damaging the wider community, beyond human society into the ecology of the environment, and the wild system of life itself (Naess, 2016).

Education for Domestication

That education could contribute to individual and collective domestication is not a recent argument. In 1971 UNESCO published 'Unusual Ideas about Education', an opinion paper by the radical educator Paulo Freire. The paper encapsulated and progressed Freire's theory of 'Cultural Action for Liberation' which ardently argued that the activity of 'education cannot be neutral' (Freire, 1971, p. 1) and that 'it is fundamental for us to know that, when we work on the content of the educational curriculum, when we discuss methods and processes, when we plan, when we draw up educational policies, we are engaged in political acts which imply an ideological choice' (1971, p. 2). Freire proposed that systematic education functions only as an instrument to maintain the infrastructure in which it is generated:

When education is oriented toward 'cultural preservation' its task is to adapt new generations to the social system it serves, which can and must be 'reformed' and 'modernised', but which will never be radically transformed. (1971, p. 3)

It remains an unsettling argument, that those involved in the practice of education are potentially agents of subjugation to the status quo rather than the catalysts for critical or generative encounters with the world as it is or is yet to be. Freire was explicit in his critique, provoking us to recognise that 'the role of education, in that it is a social "praxis", will always be in the service either of the "domestication" of men or of their liberation' (1971, p. 1).

Recognising Ourselves as Tamed, Cultural Beings

How then can those of us involved in education ‘turn wild so as not to surrender to our own wildness, but rather to acquire in that way a consciousness of ourselves as tamed, as cultural beings’ (Duerr, in Oelschlaeger, 1991, p. 9)? Is it possible that if we are encouraged to become aware of educational processes that domesticate rather than liberate, it may enable a critical evaluation of our own cultural taming and present opportunities for ways in which to move forward and take action?

Exposing the sterility of the contemporary classroom, Weston indicates a way forward by drawing attention to the ‘rigorous geometry’ of teaching spaces, how they are ‘insistently filled with wholly human sounds’ (Weston, 2004, p. 33) and ‘how thoroughly humanised most of the spaces are in which we live and work’. For Weston it is these ‘hyper-humanised’ settings that ‘subliminally work to convey a sense of the world as profoundly human-centred’ (2004, p. 33). Yet, in the stark reality of the classroom, human-centred often means teacher-centred, and therefore profoundly disconnected from the personal experience of those learning and that of the wider wilder world:

Given these views of our place in the world, it is no surprise that we have come to the cusp of an environmental crisis. It is this sense of disconnection that makes it possible for us to so ruthlessly exploit the Earth and that reassures us that we ourselves are not threatened by the degradation of larger living systems. It is otherwise an almost inexplicable fact that we are so willing to foul our own nest: it seems that only a basic refusal to acknowledge that it is our ‘nest’ could explain it. (Weston, 2004, p. 33)

Taking Wild Action

‘What if Teaching Went Wild?’ recounts a series of actions that could be undertaken by the educator committed to challenging a ‘deeply-felt sense of disconnection from the world’ (Weston, 2004, p. 31). These actions are intended to make the familiar unfamiliar, to unsettle and ultimately *unlearn* our human-centred outlook and reveal the extent to which we have been domesticated and shut off from our senses:

What is it to ‘go wild’? It is to have a sense – quite literally a ‘sense’, and a practical everyday sense too – that we co-inhabit this world with a diversity of other forms and shapes of awareness, right here and now. It is to recognise that even the shape of our own awareness often eludes us. Wild is that unsettling sense of otherness, unexpected and unpredictable and following its own flow, but still a flow that is, in some not-quite-graspable way, ours too. (Weston, 2004, p. 45)

Through these activities Weston seeks to break 'the tamed atmosphere of the classroom community, levelling barriers between the artificial and the natural world, and promoting our common humanity outside of the classroom' (Hamby, 2011, p. 2). The activities are sensorial and attempt to reposition the participants as feeling creatures:

Weston means to unsettle the classroom community through otherness ... for the otherness that Weston has in mind includes having his students eat flowers in a sacramental mode, having them study, describe, and even hold, each others' hands; having them pack their bodies into as small a space as possible during the regular course of the class meeting; bringing spiders and other insects into the class and releasing them; opening windows and talking about the fresh air outside; holding the class outside ... away from the charged atmosphere of the campus, creating a community of learning in a literally natural social setting that challenges the senses as well as the mind. (Hamby, 2011, p. 2)

This practice of a wilder pedagogy suggests that we can be brought into closer contact with our animal selves in the classroom. However, for the full relationship to become articulated and reconstructed it is essential that we get pupils, students and teachers out there, beyond the classroom and campus itself. The work of current educators giving voice to this wilder pedagogy attempts to explore what might happen away from the boundaries of the classroom and away into the wilderness.

Towards a Wild Pedagogy

The recent work of Professor Bob Jickling moves Weston's call for a wilder pedagogy forwards in an attempt to define this informal practice. Wild pedagogy has been attributed to Jickling but is here defined by Aage Jensen as:

both a methodology and a philosophy. (The 'What', 'Why' and 'How' questions in education.) Wild Pedagogy as a philosophy is based on different eco-philosophers, ecosophies and nature philosophy which focuses on other values, views and ethics in the relationship between nature and man, than the dominating mechanistic world view. The methodology can be described as a way of teaching and learning in nature or in a classroom, where the students as well as the teacher let themselves or are allowed to 'go wild' and wiggle, not without intention but in order to develop a deeper understanding and relation to nature. (Jensen, 2014, p. 1)

These uses are the most recent development of a concern with both pedagogy and the wild, an approach that seeks to call the domestication of education into question.

It is instructive to look more closely at the work of Jickling in this context. 'Sitting on an Old Grey Stone' (2009), foregrounds a concern with both the wilderness and with pedagogy as philosophical orientations. It begins with a question: 'why are students so happy when outside on a field trip?' and moves on to explore why it is that 'significant learning experiences often seem to exist at the margins of mainstream education' (Jickling, 2009, p. 164). Jickling's most recent work takes this appeal further by challenging what he sees as the domestication of pedagogy itself. 'Self-willed Learning: experiments in wild pedagogy' (2015) and 'Wild Pedagogies: a floating colloquium' (2016) present impassioned arguments that 'refresh the idea of wildness' and 'challenge the domestication of pedagogy'.

Embracing and Enabling the Self-will of Those Learning

Usefully in Jickling's 'Self-willed Learning' there is reference to the voices of two teenage participants, who were invited to travel by foot and canoe through a new landscape, creating photographic images as they moved through the wild terrain. Echoing previous notions regarding feelings and experiences of wild settings, the article reports one of the participants responding to the question 'what did you learn?' with:

Going out and actually doing it and getting the feel of every thing that's around you, and what it means to you, and how it affects you, and everything. (Jickling, 2015, p. 3)

This personal account brings us closer to the goal of a wild pedagogy, one that aims to set the senses free to experience and inhabit the more-than-human world, whilst fostering the self-will of the one learning rather than denying it. 'Will is a life force for children and without its energy something vital in them dies. What sap is to the plant, will is to the human being. Will is vitality, the iridescent juice that makes one's spirit shine' (Griffiths, 2013, p. 119).

'Wild Pedagogies: a floating colloquium' is perhaps the closest to a complete distillation of the practice, methodology and philosophy of 'wild pedagogy' as proposed by Jickling, Jensen and others currently working in the area. This work concentrates on 'the stifling control, or taming, sometimes felt by educators' (Jickling, 2015, p. 3) and students. This 'hidden curriculum' (Kelly, 1983) of domestication in current educational practices is here held to be responsible for a variety of societal problems. Instead of making things better for all, as is claimed, the process of formal education is ironically resulting in a narrowing of experience and original responses whilst heralding a potential catastrophic environmental breakdown between the individual, the human collective and the wider world.

Could this wild, autonomous and alternative pedagogy have a place, not only for reducing social and educational inequality in education by recognising and embracing the inherent self-will of those learning, but also for generating

alternative and innovative ways of thinking about our interconnection, and social dependence, with the more-than-human world?

Stepping Aside from Well-worn Educational Paths

It may be that by taking steps to challenge the notion of formal education as perpetuating a dangerous domesticity we might become able to reconstruct our own freedom and autonomy, as teachers and as students. This is where a wilder teaching practice might provoke a return to the truly sensorial, supporting the self-will of those involved in education, whilst simultaneously extending an appreciation of our interdependence with all life.

As the complexities and crises of the twenty-first century are illuminated, awareness that educational environments should be interconnected with a more-than-human world, that is itself suffering from an inequality of care, is making itself known through a growing body of research literature. This literature proposes that it may be our ability to extend equality beyond the human experience that will, conversely, be vital in working towards greater justice and well-being for all.

Perhaps we should, as those committed to exploring alternative and innovative approaches to reducing social and educational inequality, take the actions outlined by Weston, Jensen, Jickling and others, and step aside from our well-trodden educational paths and create room to truly 'go wild'. That these actions are fraught with risk alongside the possibility of getting lost (both physically and philosophically) should be encouraging. As the poet and lifetime advocate of the wild, Gary Snyder, insists: 'a path is something that can be followed, it takes you somewhere. In a sense everything *else* is off the path. The relentless complexity of the world is off to the side of the trail' (Snyder, 1990, p. 155).

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