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Making social justice problematic: Exploring an educational aporia

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Introduction

In this presentation we resume an argument made in our AARE presentations last year about how, in a 'capitalist society', the pursuit of social justice through schooling inevitably runs up against certain formidable contradictions: impossible to avoid, at the same time impossible to resolve; and yet we are ethically compelled – in responsibility towards 'less powerful others' – to pursue 'resolutions' as if they could be reached. Working to possibilise such impossibilities is, as Derrida puts it, a leap into a breach of ethically surcharged 'madness'.

Last year we made this argument strictly at a theoretical level. This year we aim to make the argument through data. In narrating our 'story' of the data, we'll build a vocabulary for theoretical argument which we'll consummate at the end.

Our data is provided by Sam Sellar, whose doctoral work is attached to the Redesigning Pedagogies in the North (RPiN) ARC linkage project (#LP0454869) in which we are among the Chief Investigators. Sam's questions focus on (1) understanding the current historical 'moment'; and (2) imagining 'pedagogies' that offer more 'just' possibilities within and leading beyond these conditions. One means of generating data to address his questions has been periodic reference groups that Sam convenes with small numbers of RPiN teachers. Sam initiates dialogue through 'provocations' that represent his thinking-in-progress, inviting teachers' thoughts in response. The data we will narrate is excerpted from Sam's second such conversation, with a group of five teachers. We aim to draw out how these teachers, chosen because of their commitments to education that benefits youth from one of Australia's most 'disadvantaged' regions, are provoked to address difficult contradictions in working towards a 'justice' that, they recognise, never happens as they want.

Narrating the Data

Sam opens the conversation by asking teachers to talk about changes in the northern Adelaide context over the course of their careers there, and how their pedagogies may have changed in relation to these broader social changes. Sam then introduces his first '*provocation*':

S: In our last discussion, we identified the powerful inertia that institutionalised schooling has within society – T1 described it as 'a great big wave'. I would like to share the provocation that 'no...institution, will ever emancipate a single person' (Ranciere, 1991, p.102). The main function of institutional schooling is the production of social orders, sorting and selecting people into particular life pathways ... [by use of] official knowledge that ... effectively sets up the

lifesavers flags: and students must surf between them or risk diminished life chances.... However, this official knowledge is not relevant to many peoples' lives ... Is it possible to engage in the surfing contest in ways that give a fair chance to all students, as RPiN and other 'two-way' approaches attempt to do by teaching official knowledge while also including and valorising lifeworld knowledge? ... Or does setting up the flags automatically ensure that some will always get surfed outside of them?

Sam here refers to approaches that try to synthesise two contradictory impulses for pursuing justice through education in a capitalist society: (1) a redistribution impulse to provide power elite CC to those who do not inherit it from their families, but that is the coin of exchange value needed for success in relation to the selective institutional 'standards' (or 'flags') of the official curricular knowledge game; or (2) a recognition impulse to free schooling from exchange values that alienate 'less advantaged' youth, instead building curriculum around use values – rich funds of knowledge and identity – from students' cultural lifeworlds beyond school. RPiN, as Sam notes, is underpinned by a 'two-way', or both/and, approach. As he elaborates further:

S: One of the logics of RPiN is that we find out what ... kids in the north know, what's relevant to them, and value that in school as a way of also teaching this other knowledge that they need to get through the flags.

In other words, starting from and centring on a use-value curriculum that recognises cultural knowledge and identity, the logic is to scaffold into learning that redistributes the exchange-value of power-elite cultural capital. However, Sam's provocation is meant to trouble this both/and 'solution':

S: Now [Ranciere] suggests that ... when we play this kind of game, we're always trying to get kids towards a point of being, of having enough knowledge or ... getting to university or just being, you know, a critical thinker ... [and] you get so caught up in this kind of institutional game of having to come up with better and better ways of giving students this knowledge they need along the way, in order that they pass at the end.

As we translate the argument: when you mix even seemingly unarguable 'use-value' aims, such as teaching 'critical thinking', with an impulse to accumulate what's needed to win the game, this logic of exchange-value accumulation overwhelms and coopts all impulses towards a more use-oriented register of values. Indeed, the redistribution impulse is thwarted as well, since the accumulation logic is inherently about hierarchically differential accumulation, and so efforts to redistribute winning capitals more 'equally' will provoke renewed sorting and selecting through 'better and better' gradations of 'standards' (or flag-settings) required for 'winning'. Sam's Rancierian suggestion, as we read it, is to wash hands of this impossibly stacked game – i.e. a de-schooling, or de-institutional, response. This provokes T1 to join the debate on behalf of the both/and logic:

T1: I've fought this fight since I was a kid, because innately I'm a bit of a rebel ... but at the same time knowing that I had to play the game to get where I wanted to get, so ... I tend to say to the kids, ... play the game... then go and play whatever game you like later ... Let's face it, we're all institutionalised, ... and I understand

about the RPiN the two-way approach, that if we still don't play the game, we still don't get there unless we're Einstein ... You can walk out of school and ... [try to become] a trader through an apprenticeship scheme ... but again that's a game.... [Y]ou've got to learn that language, don't you? So no matter what you do there is some form of game to be, to be had, in some way or another.

T1 argues that 'the game' is too pervasive for there to be an 'outside the game'. She also reflects Derrida's insight that language is 'the first institution', and, since no social activity proceeds without some level of communicative boundary selection, social intercourse is always already captured by language 'games'. It would therefore be irresponsible for teachers not to try to equip students to have chances in the game. Sam comes back at this, pointing up the inevitable injustice of the zero-sum logic that remains inherent in a 2-way approach: i.e. that there are winners in the game of accumulating the more powerful 'capitals' requires that there will be losers:

S: [T]he logic of [RPiN] and a lot of approaches to kind of making school more just and equitable, are that they're trying to find some way to give every student the opportunity, but is there a game that everyone wins ... can we do that in a classroom, or ... [does] the actual game itself mean that someone's got to end up outside the flags?

Sam here suggests that moves to coopt the game in the direction of more equitable redistribution will, by the very nature of the game, lead to cooptation of the 'equality' impulse. T2 now joins the debate, suggesting that perhaps the rules of the game – the flag positions – could at least be made more flexibly inclusive:

T2: I think that, using your analogy ... [we could seek] opportunity to move the flags, so you can make them wider and narrower ... because at the moment what we've got is lots of kids who are outside the flags looking in, saying "I want to get there, but I don't know how" ... so instead of fighting their way through they give up.

This provokes T3 to enter the debate, saying 'I don't know, maybe some of them don't want to', thus questioning the assumption that northern area kids actually *want* into the game. T1 agrees: 'I was just going to say that, maybe some of them don't want to play the grades'. Arguing further, T3 offers a self-critical reflection on the social-structural and institutional standpoint of teachers:

T3: [M]aybe what's, what's happening is that because we are such middle class people ... you know, you've got a nice big house, you drive a fancy car, you've got a massive mortgage ... but [maybe] ... that's not how they want to be measured ... not how they feel they need to live.

We suggest that the prior argumentative tilt towards a necessity of accommodating to the game has provoked T3 (and T1, although she had argued for that necessity) in the direction of constructing northern area kids' as, by class position, more use-value than exchange-value-oriented, as against teachers invested with the middle-class logic of the institutional game. This prompts T2 to refine her argument about flexible flags:

T2: [I]t's about making choices ... I mean ... if we can move the flag, say if curriculum change and curriculum development is about being able to move the flags, you move the flags to where they want it.

We read T2 here to suggest that teachers should consult students about their priorities in terms of flag settings. If there must be a game with flags, then students should have voice regarding frequency and degrees of flag movement: sometimes more narrowly – i.e. teaching-and-learning geared to equip them with winning changes in the mainstream game; sometimes more widely – i.e. teaching-and-learning based more on funds of knowledge from their cultural lifeworlds. This continues to pursue a 'both/and' solution through 'flexibility'. However, T4 is now provoked to join the debates, picking up T3's argument that northern area kids may not share the middle-class values of teachers, and taking a strong stance 'for the kids' in this regard:

T4: My wife put me back a place because, you know, "Yah, yah, T4, you've played the hard life and you've done this and you've done that, and you think you're going to be at one with the kids", she said "but you come home and you still watch a plasma telly" [other teachers murmur accord], and I said "Oh shut up!!" ... [Y]ou know, I don't want to call myself 'middleclass', but by definition I have to be ... They're still seeing me as a teacher that's, you know ... I'm well-off ... but do I really know what it's like to be living in there and, you know, we've got these people saying "Put the flags here", well it's still the same argument; we put them here, all right ... so now we're much better because they used to be here, jeeze we're good, we're putting them here. Well, why have flags at all?

By his 'hard life', TV refers to having grown up poor in the very northern area where he teaches – as did T2, whose argument about flexible flag placings he here seems to refute. T4 displays a disgusted sense of impossibility that flag positions can ever be other than selectively limiting and unfair to northern area kids who are the zero-sum game's predicated 'losers'. He thus shifts the debate towards Sam's 'Rancierean' provocation: 'Well, why have flags at all?' This seems to provoke a philosophical level of self-struggle for T1:

T1: [T]hen you get back to the idea of just what exactly is success, and what exactly is happiness. Now I keep telling people that happiness for me is a bag of clay [an art teacher, T1 has been working with students to create clay animation stories about their lives] ... [B]ut in the same vein, that daughter of mine ... she wants to actually go to uni, she wants – and God forgive the child – she wants to be a teacher ... and she therefore knows that she has to play the game ... because that is the way our sorting institution is, at this stage, but at the same time I think that there are many other ways to succeed ... hopefully.

T1 appears here to move away from her prior argument that, whatever you do with kids, 'the game' is involved. Still, she tussles between an impulse toward curriculum that opens space for funds of use-value knowledge in kids' lives, symbolised by the 'bag of clay', and an impulse to redistribute the CC needed to play and 'win' in the game, symbolised by her daughter's career aspirations. Somewhat like T2's flexible flag-setting gambit, T1 seems to strive for, but not to find, what we will later argue is a non-existent 'middle way'. Sam is here moved to renew his provocation, staging debate between T4's 'Why have flags at all?' and T2's flexible flag 'choices':

S: There's an interesting distinction between what you're saying, T2, and what T4's saying ... I mean the way I see it, ... you can still move the flags, but there have to be flags ... Now that, I guess that's kind of the crux of my question ... [I]s that kind of such a fundamental thing to the way we do it, that you might be able to fiddle with exactly where they go, but ...

Sam is clearly moving to argue that flag fiddling never gets us to anything resembling a justly equitable reduction of selective hierarchy. However, T5 here joins the debate, interrupting Sam to articulate a new tack of hope for institutions less captured by a harsh game of flags:

T5: I was thinking ... about universities, and should we still call them universities, because it's, it's not really, it's really market place, really isn't it ... but I was thinking about, you know like the romantic time of universities with ... the great poets and artists and etc, and ... they went to university but they lived in poverty.... So, so, were there always flags ... let's say a century ago, there weren't flags then, were there?

We suggest that Sam's (and T4's) strong suggestions that emancipatory institutions are impossible, and the elusive struggles of other teachers for a workable 2-way dialectic, provokes T5 – who has kept silent until now – to conjure a highly idealised binary construction of the transcendental aesthetic virtues of universities in a bygone era, as against the capitalist vices of current universities. Sam interjects a dubious 'Well ...' and T5 immediately indicates her own doubts about her construction: 'Were there? I don't know' (while T4 and T1 both interject that there must always have been selective principles of one sort or another'). In retreating from her construction of an 'ideal' institutional possibility, T5 swings to an alternative defence of institutional education, suggesting that education without flags, were it possible, would not be healthy or safe:

T5: You can take the flags away, but the ocean still exists, you know, and there are rips and there's glass in the sand ...

T2: Great white sharks!

T5: All of that and often, ringed ...

T1: Blue-ringed octopuses!

T5: Yeah, that's it, thanks very much ... so I think the flags do have to exist. If you choose to swim beyond the flags, as many of us do and always will ... you've got to have some skills and some knowledge about how to do that, and so today I, I had three English faculty staff out, redesigning the year 11 curriculum ... units that we're planning to offer, like ... chick literature, and ... writing for children, and writing for radio, and war literature, and all sorts of things just to shift the flags around, or maybe every day the flags are in a different place, to open it up.

T3: But doesn't that make your class a little more exciting?

T5: Yeah, it makes, it makes it more inviting to cooperate with the life-savers ... but it's ... a matter of, still, packaging those units, exciting and as accessible as they may be, will remain a vehicle for equipping people with the skills to negotiate the surf, because they will, however inadvertently, be acquiring understandings, critical thinking, ... language literacy skills, all the things that you want in a, in an English course and in an able English student, so it's a matter of compromise.

T5 projects a flagless ocean as fraught with danger, eliciting mirthful play about the risks. She then argues that flags are necessary, but suggests possible curriculum units that push flags to wide edges. However, when T3 hails the 'exciting' possibilities, T5 stresses serious caveats: (1) teachers need substantial skills for navigating deeper waters; (2) safe navigation requires cooperation with life-savers; and (3) the worthy payoff of such risks inheres in scaffolding learning, in the last instance, to thinking and literacy skills we would want in 'able English students'. This reclaims a both/and dialectical synthesis, or 'compromise', of use-value and exchange-value impulses as possible and, indeed, desirable in creating prospects for roughly equal (re)distribution to all students of 'all the things you want in an able English student'. This goes against Sam's argument that the very logic of flags perpetuates sorting and selecting, reinforcing inequality while killing any use-value vitality of education. T4 is incited to debate the opposite stance: that useful education requires liberation from flags:

T4: If you teach people to swim, you don't need flags do you?

T5: Yes you do?

T4: Why? ... You can swim around, you can swim through them.

T5: They need information about the currents and the ...

T4: Yeah, but if you learn to swim you can do that.

T5: Not necessarily. I mean there are people who can swim very well, who still rely on the life-savers to say "Hey, OK, this is the area today that's safest".

T4 and T5 here seem to provoke exposure of kinks in each other's argumentative stance. T4's argument that skilled swimming means you no longer need flags seems to confound itself with recognition that gaining such skills is always in relation to flags, and that flag placements shape our 'resistive' moves, so we always swim around rather than beyond flags. However, T5's argument more palpably legitimates the 'necessity' of status quo flag placements in the name of 'safety'. Sam moves to reclaim T4's stance that 'swimming' can liberate by giving it a different spin:

S: This is kind of the real chestnut ... that we often equate being intelligent or succeeding academically, etc, with university... There's a real distinction ... I think this is what you were saying, T4, when you said "It's important to be able to swim", because being able to swim is the kind of being intelligent and except you're deciding where you swim, rather than having it specified by ... [an] institutionally or structurally determined set of goalposts.

This pushes beyond T2's argument for flexible choice in deciding flag locations, to an imagined zone of institution-less free swim – a pedagogy of emancipated interactions that aren't compelled in pre-given directions and can create, dissolve and re-create movements and convergences. This is perhaps a hyperbolic provocation towards an impossible yet desirable freedom. In response, T2 moves discussion away from this impulse towards a utopian imaginary, spinning Sam's invocation of 'the importance of being able to swim' back, again, in the direction of flexible 'choice' about where flags should be located:

T2: But I guess aren't we getting to a stage where instead of moving the flags, aren't we saying that perhaps what we need to have is many flags, and then if we take

T4's idea of teaching them how to swim, when somebody can swim they can choose the flags they want to go to.

T4: T5 was saying the same thing, exactly the same.

T5: Yeah, so take them to lots of different beaches.

T2: Yeah! ...So then they can choose if they really want to go there.

T4, a former stalwart for flagless possibilities, here seems to slip into a rather 'liberal pluralist' cooptation of his argument: i.e. 'free choice' among multiple flag settings – as though, in 'learning to swim', students' choices are no longer sorted and tracked by institutional 'standards' vested in the varied flag placements from among which they 'choose'. And although T5 joins this ratification moment, we don't see her as having endorsed such a position previously; rather, her earlier arguments seemed to stress equitable redistribution of the cultural capital needed to stay afloat in 'the game'.

We suggest that the teachers have arrived at a dubious, more-or-less arbitrary 'consensus', signifying exhaustion of their various efforts to ambush what we believe is a non-existent middle ground within a formidable contradiction, which Sam's provocation made central to their dialogue. Sam soon decides that this provocation is spent, and moves on to his next provocation. We will leave the transcript here, and spend time now in theorising the contradictory problematic of social-educational justice as carried in this provocative bit of dialogue.

Re-thinking the 'both/and' tension as aporetic rather than dialectical

We see these five RPiN teachers as tending, like the RPiN CIs (including us), to go after a dialectical both/and 'resolution' of the paradoxical tension between two significant impulses towards social-educational justice on behalf of 'less advantaged' kids. We've named this as a tension between a redistribution or exchange-value impulse; and a recognition or use-value impulse. The one impulse invests in curricular redistribution of power-elite CC to those, such as northern suburbs youth, not born into the culture of it; nor does teaching as usual generally distribute it to them, but sorts and selects them for less powerfully track 'pathways' based on their lack, or 'deficit', of it. The other impulse seeks to free such youth from humiliations and alienations of the CAC game of exchange-value accumulation, investing instead in a curriculum of engagement through stronger connection with funds of knowledge that have cultural use value in the students' lifeworlds.

A dialectical approach to such a both/and, as we understand it, conceives that the two contradictory impulses can be joined such that both are enabled, and even mutually enable each other. We suggest that T2's 'flexibly placed flags' represents such a dialectical hope; and so does T5's argument for curriculum that can engage kids in pushing the edges of flag limits, but that scaffolds back to the 'proper' literacies we'd want in 'all able English students'.

However, our analytical narration shows the teachers continually forced, by Sam's provocations and their own self-reflexive whip-lashings, to trouble both their own turns towards one or the other impulse, and their own turns towards a dialectical middle way, or to a synthetically better 'third' way. Indeed, as soon as, individually or collectively, they turn on one direction, senses of need for what the other direction offers arise and become more persuasive; and the pendulum never finds a comfortable stopping point either in the middle or outside the swing, thus perpetuating the arc.

Following Derrida, we argue that this suggests a contradiction which does embody the possibility of a dialectical resolution, but rather constitutes an aporia: an unresolvable contradiction, as per the following graphic:

Dialectic: \leftrightarrow Aporia: $\leftrightarrow/?/\rightarrow$

We work here from Derrida's *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. In the interests of time, we will quote from a concise synopsis of the nature of a Derridean aporia as defined by Simon Critchley and Richard Kearney in their preface to Derrida's book, with reference to pursuit of socially just 'forgiveness' (as in truth and reconciliation processes). We add some interpolations based on our reading of the book, including interpolated bits of quote from Derrida.

[F]orgiveness ... has a characteristically double structure ... On the one hand, there is what Derrida calls an 'unconditional [or hyperbolic] purity', which could be described as ethical in the ... Levinasian sense of infinite responsibility [for others]. On the other hand, there is the order of pragmatic conditions, at once historical, legal, political, and quotidian, which demand [institutional processes that 'impurely' compromise the ethical impulse] ... [F]or Derrida ... responsible political action ... consists in the negotiation between these two irreconcilable yet indissociable demands ... [with] active respect for both poles of this tension. Derrida writes, "I must then ... [undertake] transaction between two contradictory and equally justified imperatives" [which are "infinitely contradictory, placing me before the aporia of a double injunction"]. Justice must be restlessly negotiated in the conflict ... [a] justice that is always [yet] to be done. [As to truly "responsible decision" between the contradictory imperatives, "an abyss remains, and must remain", which "is more than difficult; it is infinitely distressing ... at once necessary and apparently impossible" – "a madness of the impossible".]

By this perspective of an aporetic rather than dialectical tension, Sam's provocative argument that institutions always have flags, and flags debilitate ethical possibilities, holds up. But it does not hold that an answer can be found in educational 'swimming' – in pedagogical transactions – liberated from historical-institutional capture.

We suggest that what, for want of better words, we have called the recognition or use-value impulse signifies something beyond words – a 'pure', unconditionally ethical imperative that, in Derrida's terms, is 'hyperbolic'. That is, its 'practical' meaning is ultimately unknowable, indefinitely deferred, yet to arrive, ever 'to come'. It signifies an impulse of infinite ethical respect and responsibility for the 'equality' of all others, not merely in the sense of their right to redistribution of material and cultural capitals for having real chances in the power game (which, given the deep historical capture of institutions by the unequal accumulation logic of capital, is itself impossible). Rather, it is in the sense of respect and responsibility for the equivalent being-ness, culturally and otherwise, of all who share life spaces with us. At the same time, we have no choice but to put this ethical impulse of infinitely pure responsibility into negotiation with the pragmatic imperatives of schooling and other institutions pervaded by the logic of capital, which will coopt the impulse in service of many historical inequalities and their reproductive mechanisms and momentums.

Here, Sam's provocation becomes what Derrida calls 'haunting'. It suggests a freedom 'to come' that teachers of course crave as resources of hope to keep going. Yet their attempts to grasp at such curricular and pedagogical freedom bring them into encounter with problematically sobering difficulties of connecting meaningfully with students' lifeworlds; problematic difficulties of building rigorous curriculum around lifeworld funds of useful knowledge and getting students to engage in it; problematic difficulties of getting students to engage in mainstream curriculum that humiliates and alienates them; and problematic difficulties of putting funds of knowledge and 'winning' CC together in a scaffolded 'both/and'.

The teachers ruefully face both their own institutionalisation and how well their students already know how to deflect both 'the game' and any alternative they propose. Students and teachers both tend to give up the redistribution impulse: 'exchange value' as too hard. They also tend to give up on the recognition impulse, which may seem even harder, inevitably to be tainted by 'the main game' and, even in utopian thought experiments of 'what if', terribly obscure as to what it could actually mean in practice (better the devil you know than the angel that is unknowable).

Nonetheless, these teachers do leap into the mad breach. They gird themselves for small victories, always far from what they sincerely hope for, yet pushing for more than would come if they surrendered to mere dominance of the capital-accumulation 'game', the CAC, in which northern area students are systemically predicated 'losers'. Merely pragmatic vision or effort does not gain even small improvements, but does kill spirit. These teachers do sense that, in pursuing social justice, they are called by an ethical responsibility to negotiated the 'both/and' double injunction, with vitality and courage of conviction, however 'impossibly mad' this may be. In doing so they can chase the only promise that Derrida suggests might then be met: not that their efforts will bring about anything close to 'socially just' institutions; nor that they will enable emancipated freedom from institutional games; but that, for students and themselves, it could make the hard work of institutional schooling – and the rewards – better than they would be otherwise.

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