



Introduction to the special issue on alternative education/educational alternatives

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The impetus for this special issue comes from a rather quotidian place. A number of years ago, I (Stephen) was having lunch with my aunt and her children. At the time, I was getting close to finishing my PhD, but wasn't finished quite yet, in a somewhat frustrating manner. It was the period of doctoral study where anyone around you learns very quickly to not ask 'how's your PhD going?' My aunt knew this. Her children were younger and very excited to be telling me about the upcoming school year and where they would be going, what new grade they would be entering, and things of that nature.

'I'm going to be in first grade. What grade are you going to be in, Uncle Stephen?' my cousin asked.

Long pause... mental calculations....

'Well, I'm not really in a grade per se... but if I had to say, I guess it would be the 23rd grade.'

A horrified look crossed her face. 'I hope I never have to go to the 23rd grade. That sounds like being in school forever.''

And I had to admit, especially from that perspective, she had a point. I found myself thinking back on this moment more recently and reflecting that despite either being a student formally in an educational institution, or now teaching in one, indeed I have been in some relationship to schooling almost my entire life. And despite that, if I were to put together a list of the moments and experiences that I've learned the most from, that have shaped me the most, very few of them would be from anything taking place in a formal classroom. Instead of events in the class room, I'd rather end up with a list of experiences including high school punk bands, making zine and organizing DIY music gigs, reading groups in bookstores, galleries, and cafes, to more recently working on open access publishing projects with independent publishers and magazines. Very few of these would have a formal or official relationship with education, but yet when looked at from the right angle, it could be seen how one could learn from them. Perhaps this is an extension of the often-repeated idea that while going to an academic

conference is good, it's often the conversations during lunch or during a post-panel drink that end up being the most interesting and rewarding aspects.

What connects these different experiences from an educational perspective is how they could be thought of as comprising or involving moments of deep learning. This is because they were not part of any formal or official institutional program, anyone involved was there out of their own intrinsic interest in the subject or activity, and not because it would lead to any qualification, outcome, or reward. And while making a zine or organizing a punk show are not usually thought of as 'educational' activities, they require forms of sociality and cooperation that make them possible. There are skills of cooperation, collaboration, and media production that are learned and developed through those activities. That is to say they can also be understood as having components of knowledge production enmeshed in them. This is why Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013) make use of their much broader conception of study, to highlight aspects of knowledge production and learning which are found in forms of social life both inside and outside the formal classroom setting.

This is the impetus from which this special issue of JALT on alternative education started. What if we explored the notion of alternative education starting not from the classroom but rather looking outside of it, to these moments of informal study and collective self-chosen activity? What if we looked to find not more policies and committees, but rather desires and joys contained in moments where people are doing and making something together as an end in itself rather than on the way to something or somewhere else? What could we find there? The honest and only real answer is that we didn't know, which is what makes asking the question interesting in the first place (if you already know what you'd find there's little reason to ask).

The materials contained in this issue all have some kind of relationship with the 'outside' or extended world of alternative educational practice. They are based on a virtual symposium on Alternative Education/Educational Alternatives in July 2020 that was co-organized by us on

behalf of Essex Business School and Kaplan Singapore. We now provide a brief overview of the diverse contents of this special issue.

Claudia Firth's contribution "Learning and organising for radical change: A counter-history of reading groups as popular education" kicks off the research article section. It provides a unique insight into the potential of a range of social forums and organization practices by discussing the pedagogical and organizational processes that underpin reading and study groups in relation to social and political movements. Lydia Lymperis's contribution "Evidence from a blended remote learning intervention in Greek small rural primary schools" leads us into different terrain and follows up on an earlier contribution to JALT (Lymperis, 2019). Lymperis not only examined primary school-going children in rural parts of Greece who have no access to English language instruction in their schools, but also provided them with an intervention through online English lessons. Her study contributes to an emerging body of research of blended educational formats in resource-poor settings that go beyond conventional online/hybrid teaching models.

The third contribution in the research article section is by Michael Sutton and Carlos Francisco Bitencourt Jorge, entitled "Phenomenological approach to applying reflective journaling to experiential learning". The authors apply a fresh phenomenological perspective to reflective learning and provide examples from spiritual communities and experientially-based adult learning with the purpose to introduce an instructional tool that can be used for knowledge creation based on personal learning experiences narrated within reflective learning journals. The final research article – Chris Lee's "Centering the document – Towards a critical studio pedagogy in graphic design" – brings a critical design perspective to our heterogeneous discourse. Influenced by Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, he reimagines graphic design in a holistic and fundamental, historically-informed way by focusing on 'the document' as a substrate of the capitalist state and aims at a framework for graphic design pedagogy that aspires to lead to critical and emancipatory modes of sociality.

One of the highlights of the issue is an interview with Martin Parker, entitled "Strategic utopianism and the avoidance of dualisms". Professor Parker is a prominent voice in critically oriented management and organization studies and the author of the provocatively-titled *Shut down the business school* (2018). Parker proposes to widen the scope of business and management studies and his recent books have been about alternative types of organizations, *Life after Covid-19* (Parker (Ed.), 2020) and *Anarchism, organization and management* (Parker et al., 2020). In a typically wide-ranging interview, we discuss Martin Parker's fascinating oeuvre and amongst many other things, the dual character of the hidden curriculum in business schools and the incomplete decolonisation of curricula.

One of the emergent themes of this special issue is the critical reappraisal of one of the classics of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire. In his brief article "Education's state of hegemony: Considering the contemporaneity of 'conscientisation'", Nelson Ang discusses whether such a critical pedagogy

continues to be relevant. The author argues that it continues to have unabated transformational potential, but we must avoid domesticating Freire and not fall into the trap of reducing his pedagogy to mere methods.

The issue is completed by three book reviews and a presentation and discussion that is directly derived from the symposium's intentionally idiosyncratic keynote presentation. Mohamed Fadhil critically reviews Mike Neary's *Student as producer* in which Neary (who participated in the symposium) critiques the 'capitalist university' and develops a revolutionary curriculum. Jürgen Rudolph examines two books: McLaren & Wilson's comic book *Breaking free. The life and times of Peter McLaren, radical educator* and Antonia Darder's *The student guide to Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed*. Darder provides an expertly-written guide to Freire's key work that is informed by her own work with the Brazilian pedagogue, while McLaren decided to create a comic book that artistically, and necessarily succinctly, synthesises his colourful life and eloquent work. Finally, the Singaporean Bras Basah Open School of Philosophy presents their projects and experiences in alternative education.

There could have been so much more. At that point in time, amongst the symposia organized by Kaplan Singapore and selected university partners, the symposium on Alternative Education / Educational Alternatives was the best subscribed with close to 100 participants. Due to a rigorous peer review process and authors missing deadlines, the issue became smaller than it could have otherwise been. We were thinking of discussing additional classics such as, amongst many others, Neil Postman and Ivan Illich (in another JALT issue, Rudolph (2020) reviewed Gabbard (2020) on Illich). Perhaps this calls for a sequel symposium. In the meantime, there are other articles scattered across JALT that would have fit well into this issue: more recently, for instance, an interview with Peter Fleming on dark academia, the pandemic and neoliberalism (Fleming et al., 2021); and Moore et al.'s (2021) article on "Supporting casual teaching staff in the Australian neoliberal university: A collaborative approach".

What can we make from these different experiments and experiences? The beauty of it is that it's not up to us as the editors of this special issue, really. In the end, the questions end up being what you, the readers, can learn and make from what's in the issue. The value of alternative educational practices is precisely not how they appear on some league table or metric. We might say, cheekily channeling Marie Kondo (2014), that their value is in what joy they spark, both for those who were involved, and then for people who learn from them by drawing on these experiences in their practice, whatever or wherever it may be. And to conclude where we started, with the conversation with Stephen's cousin about finishing his PhD, we will leave you with the drawing she gave him after he finished, which was her attempt to portray the feelings of joy he was experiencing upon finishing his PhD (in her rendering that would be the most exciting thing ever, which for her was getting ice cream).

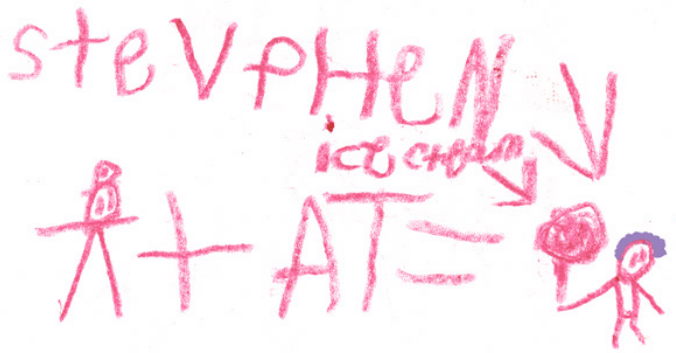


Figure 1: Stephen's cousin's congratulatory drawing.

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