

# Higher Education for Good

Teaching and Learning Futures



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## 7. Fostering the gift: On property regimes and teaching pedagogies in higher education

*Andreas Wittel*

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Let us begin this chapter with a story of hope. As for all parts of society, the COVID-19 lockdown had profound implications for higher education in the United Kingdom. I want to point to one of the most surprising implications regarding bureaucracy, processes, procedures, and regulations. Such procedures are products of strictly hierarchical decisions that are imposed, as in all corporations, by managerial staff. The most astonishing realisation about changes due to lockdown was the fact that many well-established procedures could not only be changed, but they could also be changed with lightning speed. Furthermore, these changes all handed over power to university teachers, or more precisely, the changes handed power back to university teachers. With the commodification of higher education and the transformation of formerly public institutions into profit-making corporations, the autonomy of university teachers had become significantly reduced over the last decades. Suddenly, however, this autonomy returned. Shortly after the introduction of lockdown, university teachers found themselves free to make crucial decisions about adapting teaching to the requirements of the sudden shift to online education. They were asked to improvise and find flexible solutions. They did not have to justify their decisions. University teachers were the only ones who could rescue the academic year for students and therefore, for the university. They were given a *carte blanche* for this rescue.

To give an example: assessments are one of the most scrutinised areas of quality control in higher education. They are scrutinised by the united efforts of managers, teachers, and external examiners.

Making changes to assessments is a complex procedure, one that takes time. While the duration of this process differs across universities, applications for changes are usually made many months before the start of a new academic year. This means that often more than a year can pass between the initial application for a change of assessment, and the actual period in which the assessment is carried out. The scrutiny of assessments is so vigorous that there is no room for spontaneity. It is also difficult to introduce a new assessment from a perspective of sheer curiosity, from a trial-and-error position that can reverse things if the changes do not work well. With the introduction of lockdown, some assessments had to be changed. This affected student presentations, which had to be moved to an online mode. Applications for extensions were granted without evidence or any questions asked. What mattered were not established procedures but finding a way to complete the academic year so that students could move on.

This period of increased power and autonomy for university teachers did not last long. Soon management took back control and bureaucratic procedures were re-established. Still, this is a story of hope. It demonstrates that alternatives exist, that neither the bureaucratic procedures nor the hierarchical power structures within the university are set in stone. It also demonstrates that it is important, even imperative, to imagine an alternative university and an alternative form of higher education. The invitation to reflect on good education is a challenge that demands imagination. It is in this spirit that I will address the theme of this book: good education.

In the first part, *Higher education as a gift*, I argue that higher education is a gift, like art, or better, that it can be a gift. For the gift to emerge we need to explore the political-economic context in which higher education operates. We also need to examine teaching pedagogies that provide fertile soil for the gift. I examine the potential of the gift to shine from these two angles. The first angle (property regimes or political economies) will be explored in the second part of this chapter — *From public to private to common good*. In the third part, *Higher education for life*, I explore good pedagogies. I argue that in times of multiple and existential crises, three pedagogical principles are particularly important to create the gift.

## Higher education as a gift

Hyde (2007) develops an innovative approach to gift theory. He explores art as a gift and explains the connection between the gift and art through a comparison of art with non-art. Using the example of a specific line of romantic novels that are mass-produced “according to a formula developed through market research” (Hyde 2007, p. xv), Hyde explains their form of mass production published within fixed formulaic parameters. Hyde (2007) argues that this series of romantic novels is not perceived as art since it has been written with only one intention: for it to be sold on the market:

It is the assumption of this book that a work of art is a gift, not a commodity. Or, to state the modern case with more precision, that works of art exist simultaneously in two ‘economies’, a market economy and a gift economy. Only one of these is essential, however: a work of art can survive without a market, but where there is no gift there is no art (p. xvi).

For Hyde, the notion of the gift refers on the one hand to the creation of the artwork, to the gift or talent of the artist. But it also refers to an audience, to those who get challenged, touched, moved, inspired, or transformed by a work of art. The inner world of the gift is the inner world of the artist, the creator of the gift. The outer world refers to the recipients of the gift. While most anthropologists, starting with Mauss (1954), explore the gift from the perspective of social relations, Hyde has his starting point with the gift as an object. From this perspective of the gift as an object, he then explores its social dimensions. These social dimensions, Hyde insists, are not just the bond between the gift giver and its receiver. Ultimately, they are about a community of people who circulate gifts.

Hyde’s interest in the immaterial aspects of the gift is particularly relevant to my argument. A painting in a gallery exists obviously in a very material form, often with a frame that marks its physical space. However, the gift of this painting does not travel in its material form, as the painting does not leave the gallery. The gift that the visitor of a gallery receives by being drawn to the painting is completely immaterial: a thought, a feeling, an experience, an understanding, a memory, a connection, or a vision.

For Hyde, the cardinal difference between gift exchange and commodity exchange is the fact that a gift establishes a bond, whereas the commodity does not. The commodity might have value (in the sense of exchange value), but the gift has worth: “We do not deal in commodities when we wish to initiate or preserve ties of affection” (Hyde 2007, p. 85). For this reason, we associate the gift with community and with obligation, whereas we associate commodities with alienation and freedom. The bond creating nature of the gift is also the reason why some gifts must be refused.

Perhaps the most important point Hyde makes about gifts is their tendency to circulate. He uses various examples to illustrate their circulation in gift communities. Scientific knowledge blossoms much more in a gift environment compared to a market environment that treats scientific knowledge as a commodity. This is also true for material gifts which leave the binary of giving and taking, often travelling from one person to the next. The gift increases its worth as it moves from the second to the third person. Hyde (2007) posits that “While gifts are marked by motion and momentum at the level of the individual, gift exchange at the level of the group offers equilibrium and coherence, a kind of anarchist stability” (p. 97). Indeed, Hyde sees strong connections between anarchist theory and practices of gift exchange. Ultimately, he understands gifts as an “anarchist property” (Hyde 2007, p. 120). Both gift exchange and anarchism share the assumption that community appears at its best when parts of the self are not restrained but given away.

Higher education is a gift and not a commodity, just as art is a gift and not a commodity. It can exist in two economies — in a market economy and in a gift economy. However, only one of these is essential. Education can survive without a market, but where there is no gift, there is no education. The gift in education is something that lies beyond economic rationality: it refers to a specific form of pedagogy. Similar to art, the gift in education refers to a gifted teacher and to a student who becomes enriched, inspired, challenged, moved, or transformed. For the gift in higher education to emerge, certain conditions must be met. These conditions refer to both property regimes (or to political economies) and to pedagogical principles. Let us begin with the exploration of the political-economic context of higher education.

## From public to private to common good

There is little disagreement in the literature that the transformation of the public university into a corporate institution, and the transformation of academic work into academic labour, is not a development to be applauded. The many downsides are all too clear, starting with the obvious fact that students begin their adult life with the burden of a huge amount of debt which they will have to repay for years and decades to come. Particularly problematic is the integration of education into consumer culture and the transformation of an educational interaction into a service industry, where students are turned into customers and teachers into facilitators.

This raises the question: which political economy of higher education can protect or even foster the gift? I argue that the status and the nature of the gift in education changes according to the political-economic regime in which higher education is provided. These political-economic regimes refer to different forms of property: public property and private property. In both regimes, the public university and the commodified university, the gift is obscured.

In regimes of education as a private good (the commodified or corporate university), the gift becomes so obscured that it is nearly invisible. We do not perceive something to be a gift that we pay for. Considering that fees in higher education are often life-changing investments, it is no wonder that students expect a good return for their investment. What happens when students are turned into consumers of education? For Stiegler (2010), consumerism produces impoverished and passive subjects, leading to a destruction of “*savoir vivre* with the aim of creating available purchasing power” (p. 27). He describes consumerism as a form of proletarianisation. While he does not connect his critique of consumerism to the field of education, such a link is rather illuminating. Students who define themselves as consumers of education become impoverished as all positive aspects of learning (including the work, dedication, commitment, and energy that is required to learn) are overshadowed by an ideology that equates the purchase of education with the ownership of knowledge. After all, consumption is the opposite of production and work. It is safe to say that the market intensifies experiences of alienation for both the teacher

and the student. Ultimately the market suffocates the gift-giving and gift-receiving nature of education.

However, this does not mean that a return to the public university is necessarily the most desirable option. In regimes of education as a public good, the gift gets obscured by the provision of a service by the state, a provision that is free for students and paid for by taxes. Nostalgia for education as a public good tends to ignore the critique that this regime has generated. Nearly half a century ago, Bourdieu (1986) argued convincingly that class and social distinctions are predominantly upheld through education and the public university. Willis (1977) and Collins (1979) have developed similar arguments about university education as a space of privilege. For this reason, I have much sympathy with the position of the Edu-factory collective (2009) which states the following:

The state university is in ruins, the mass university is in ruins, and the university as a privileged place of national culture — just like the concept of national culture itself — is in ruins. We're not suffering from nostalgia. Quite the contrary, we vindicate the university's destruction. (p. 1)

It is only in a third regime, in the political economy of the commons that the gift in higher education can truly shine. Obviously, this does not mean that every higher education commons is per se an idyllic site. Issues of power and domination will not go away, but the common ownership of higher education does provide the most fertile ground for the gift to unfold.

A commons is generally understood as a set of natural or cultural resources that can be used by all those members who are part of a commons. The members of a commons are stakeholders with an equal interest in the resources that are being shared. The resources are created or administered by the commoners. The enemy of the commons is the market. Processes of privatisation, marketisation, and commodification of common property are an enclosure or a dispossession of the commons. Together with the state, the market aims to destroy the commons.

Liberal concepts of the commons (Ostrom, 1990) emphasise the sharing of resources. My understanding of a commons is more influenced by Marxist concepts of a commons as a social system. De Angelis (2017) makes an important distinction between endogenous and exogenous dimensions of the commons. While Ostrom is mostly concerned with the internal aspects of the commons (with the social



system between commoners), Marxian theorists are more interested in how the social system of a commons is influenced by external factors, by capital. The Marxian perspective is vital for an understanding of the difficulties to create a higher education commons.

To explore the possibility of a higher education commons, we need to start with the relation between education and a commons. The notion of an education commons is rather problematic. If we apply the definition of liberal commons theorists such as Ostrom's, the shared resource in an education commons would be knowledge. However, contrary to the definition, knowledge is not equally shared in a community of education commoners. In fact, it cannot be equally shared as the very process of education is fundamentally hierarchical, with teachers more likely to be on the giving end (delivering knowledge and deciding on the form of pedagogy), and students more likely to be on the receiving end of the educational process. A similar problem arises with the self-organisation and the governance of an education commons. It is difficult to imagine a setting that gives students the same influence as teachers in the organisation, and the normative framework in educational processes.

Still, there are numerous examples of education commons. For this, we should turn to anarchist and libertarian theories and practices of education (Suissa, 2010). Most anarchist educators see an anarchist school as an embryo of a future anarchist society. Therefore, anarchist education must embrace and reflect core anarchist values and principles such as equality, autonomy, brotherhood, solidarity, mutualism, non-coercion, generosity, and collective forms of decision-making. One of the key challenges for anarchist education is to translate these values and principles into the practicalities of the relationship between teachers and students. The challenge is to make this relationship as equal and non-hierarchical as possible. Famous anarchist schools such as the Escuela Moderna in Barcelona, the Ferrer School in New York, and the Walden Center in Berkeley have put their emphasis on a more spontaneous, child-centred, anti-authoritarian pedagogy, on learning-by-doing, and on communal and co-operative learning. Students are included in decision-making processes about the curriculum and encouraged to organise their own work schedules. Rigid timetables are to be avoided, and students allowed to come and go as they wish. Last,

but not least, such schools insist on a form of teaching that does not make use of grades, awards, or punishments.

Another example of an education commons is the much younger tradition of homeschooling or home education communities. While homeschooling is as old as humankind, the modern homeschooling movement started in the 1960s as a reaction to state education. It is not an anarchist invention but has received much support from anarchist educational philosophers. Homeschooling initiatives are neither organised by the market nor by the state. They are run by parent-commoners and function according to the time and labour they invest. All parents who are part of a homeschooling network invest more or less in such a project and have an approximate influence in the governance of the network.

What does this mean for higher education? Due to the highly specialised nature of higher education, an arrangement like homeschooling is difficult to set up in capitalist societies. Nevertheless, a tradition of a higher education commons does exist in the form of free and autonomous universities. Free and autonomous universities such as the Free and Autonomous University of San Francisco in the US, or the Social Science Centre in the UK are neither organised by the market nor by the state.

Although free and autonomous universities have a long historical tradition, their recent surge is very much a response to the commodification of higher education. Free and autonomous universities are an activist approach to higher education that aims to create a non-alienated framework for teaching and learning. These institutions usually do not have formal recognition. They are not able to offer certification comparable to public or private universities. However, this is not seen as a problem. On the contrary, it gives them a great amount of freedom with respect to both organisational structures and pedagogical approaches.

While organisational structures and pedagogical approaches vary between these institutions, there is a good deal of common ground. Most of them avoid or aim to reduce hierarchical structures between teachers and students. Most of them operate based on collective decision-making processes. They also share much common ground with respect to pedagogy and the meaning of education. They reject a vision of university education that prepares students for work in capitalist economies. Instead, they aim to transform higher education. They see education as a social and political project, as a crucial steppingstone for

the creation of another society. Indeed, free and autonomous universities share most of the values of the anarchist theories of education.

Free and autonomous universities have emerged in many geographical locations all over the world in the last two decades, but most of them are or were in the strongholds of neoliberal capitalism, namely in the UK and the USA. It should also be noted that many of these initiatives have had a rather short lifespan. To understand why it is so difficult to develop sustainable institutions of autonomous higher education, we need to turn our attention to labour. Educational labour takes place predominantly in the interaction between teacher and student. While this educational labour is voluntary and non-paid labour, therefore a non-alienated form of labour, it is nonetheless intense and time-consuming. It requires a significant and sustainable enthusiasm from those who provide it. It is in these settings that the gift of higher education can shine especially bright and clear. However, as this is a gift that does not generate an obligation to return the gift — like art — it is fragile and vulnerable, because it comes with a high price for those who teach without getting paid for their work. One of the longest initiatives in the UK was the Social Science Centre in Lincoln, which opened in 2011 and was closed in 2019.

## Higher education for life: On resonance, relevance, and imagination

The third and final part of this chapter engages with pedagogies that help to assert the gift in higher education. I focus on three pedagogical principles: resonance, relevance, and imagination. Resonance is about the relationship between the teacher and the student. Relevance is about the content that is taught. Imagination is about a learning objective.

### Resonance

Let us inspect closer the educational gift that emerges in the interaction between student and teacher. For this, I will introduce Hartmut Rosa's concept of resonance. Rosa (2013) analyses contemporary social transformations mainly through the lens of acceleration. Rosa identifies three forms of acceleration that have changed the speed of modern life. The first one, technological acceleration, refers to transport technologies,

communication technologies, and technologies of production. The second form is the acceleration of social change which refers to things such as cultural knowledge, social institutions, and personal relationships. The third form is the acceleration in the pace of life and a chronic lack of time: even though technological change should free up time for individuals (as we can travel, communicate, and produce at ever-increasing speed), our pace of life is still accelerating. These three forms and their internal connection is what Rosa calls “social acceleration”. The discrepancy between technological acceleration and organisation efficiency, and the acceleration of our pace of life is what Rosa (2013) defines as growth: “the average rate of growth (defined as the increase of the total quantity of things produced, communicated, distances covered, etc.) exceeds the average rate of acceleration” (p. 68–69). To put it simply, the more we try to save time via technological means, the less time we have. However, this does not mean that technological innovations are the culprit. These innovations do not make our life faster. They are rather a consequence of an experience of a scarcity of time. The real culprit is capitalism, a system that turns time into money and acceleration into profit. In the logic of capital, social acceleration turns into an unavoidable compulsion.

From this perspective, Rosa develops a new critique of alienation. If changes in the pace of our lives occur at an ever faster rate, it becomes difficult to maintain strong feelings, convictions, and connections — social, institutional, personal, and intimate connections. What is required instead is flexibility and adaptability to change. There is no need for depth and authenticity anymore. All attempts to intimately familiarise with the status quo, and all attempts to create stability, stand in direct contrast to the need to keep up with change. Rosa understands alienation as a loss of autonomy and self-determination, as an experience of life under the condition of frenetic acceleration.

For Rosa (2016), the opposite of alienation is resonance. We are non-alienated when we manage to build non-instrumental, responsive, and transformative relationships. These are relationships with people, but also with nature and with art. They are not about domination, manipulation, and control. Instead, they are about a form of interaction that is based on mutuality, on the dialogical nature of listening and answering. Relationships resonate when our interactions are important and meaningful, when we are touched and affected by them. We travel to

the sea because the sea can speak to us, because we become transformed by our interaction with the sea. We listen to live music because we want to be affected and transformed by this experience. Rosa insists that resonance does not mean a harmonious relationship. Complete harmony does not generate dialogue and resonance. Resonance is as much about dissonance, about the discerning of difference. Thus, disagreement, even conflict, is one important ingredient of resonance. But resonance also needs convergence and the building of bridges. Otherwise, the transformation would be impossible.

Rosa's concept of resonance has much in common with Hyde's concept of the gift. Obviously higher education depends on the principles of interaction, dialogue, mutuality, and reciprocity. It cannot be a one-way street. Concepts of the "pure gift" (Derrida, 1994), a gift that is based on altruism, do not apply here. The pure or altruistic gift does not create social obligations, and does not produce any bonds. It does not produce resonance. The concept of education as a gift is about mutuality. For higher education to work as a gift, it must generate feedback. No response, no resonance, no gift. A visitor of an art gallery who remains unaffected by a work of art in front of her will hardly perceive this work as a gift. The same is true in education. Students who remain unaffected by the interaction with their teacher do not receive a gift.

## Relevance

Relevance is about linking one topic to another one in a way that helps to improve an understanding of the first topic. Relevance refers to the content of education. It is about themes and topics. How can we decide which topics matter or matter perhaps more than others? How can we privilege some themes over others? How can we develop hierarchies of relevance? After all, what is relevant is profoundly subjective. It is subjective because it is a reaction to the conditions and contexts within which we experience life and the world. What is relevant depends on our geographical (local, regional, and national), political, social, economic, cultural, and spiritual contexts.

Furthermore, the notion of relevance depends on whether our contexts, circumstances and environments are relatively stable or characterised by rupture, transformation, and/or crisis. In times of

relative stability, the question of relevance might be less contested and perhaps less urgent than in times of transformation. In times of crisis, the question of relevance moves to centre stage. Hall and Schwarz (1985) tell us that “crises occur when the social formation can no longer be reproduced on the basis of the preexisting system of social relations” (p. 9). There is little disagreement that we are confronted with multiple crises, among others a crisis of social justice, a crisis of democracy and political legitimacy with growing and intensifying social exclusions and divisions, and a crisis of capitalism with rapidly increasing economic inequality on a global scale. We are also confronted with the threat of intensifying global conflict and possibly an increase in global wars. The most important crisis we must address is climate change and environmental collapse.

We are living in the age of extinction. Extinction is not a singular event; it is a process, and it has already begun. Both animal species and plant species have significantly decreased over the last half century. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which has a history of underestimating the real pace of climate change, predicts in their *Sixth Assessment Report* that from 2022, it is likely that global temperatures will exceed by 1.5 degrees preindustrial levels in the next two decades, and that this will likely lead to a further extinction of 20% to 30% of the remaining animal and plant species. The report also makes clear that climate change has already harmed human physical and mental health and has increased human mortality and morbidity. Even though there is a possibility to avoid human extinction, it is too early to make assumptions. After all, this question will depend on how we (humans) will act during the coming decades. It will depend on the decisions we take to overcome extinction, it will depend on our ability to create a new global system of social relations, and a new system of relations with non-human life that can slow down and ultimately halt extinction.

In such a situation, education can only be relevant if it makes connections that help to address and to overcome the multiplicity of crises that humanity is facing. Technocratic approaches will not help. In such a situation good education is education that understands relevance most of all from a moral perspective. To say this loud and clear, good education is education that values all life.

## Imagination

For very good reasons, the concept of critical thinking is a key learning objective in the social sciences and the humanities. Critical thinking is a core skill concerned with the development of persuasive arguments, the assessment of credible evidence to support an argument and the exploration of weaknesses in the argument of others. It is an academic skill which is based on the premise that the stronger argument wins.

To explain why critical thinking needs to be complemented with the fostering of imagination, I want to turn to a famous quote by Antonio Gramsci (1971):

The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear (p. 276)

Written nearly 100 years ago while being imprisoned by Mussolini, this quote could hardly be more relevant today. Today's morbid symptoms, to name a few, are the continuous rise of social and economic inequalities, the attack on democratic institutions and practices, and environmental collapse on an accelerating scale. The question needs to be raised whether critical thinking is sufficient to equip students with the skills they need to overcome the interregnum and to be able to contribute to the birth of the new.

Critical thinking is a fundamental skill to foster analysis and understanding. It does not foster a way of thinking that creates alternatives. Imagination is needed as a core learning objective. Imagination is about possibilities, different systems and structures and a different way to live. For imagination to be productive, it needs to align the present with a different future. It needs to make suggestions on how to get from the old to the new. For imagination to be productive, it needs to be aware of power and class, it needs to be aware of the interests of those who benefit from the old and oppose the new. For imagination to be productive, it needs to reflect on forms of organisation that can bring about change. Finally, for imagination to be productive, it needs to be based on hope for a better future, on optimism of the will, to borrow again from Gramsci.

Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, published in 1968, is an invaluable starting point for such an educational journey. More

recently, Henry Giroux's *Pedagogy of Resistance* (2022) provides a timely reengagement with Freire's work, revisiting his *Pedagogy of Hope*. Giroux argues that a pedagogy of resistance needs to be built around a vision that is based on hope. Indeed, the recent surge of academic literature that emphasises the value of hope in dark times is a very hopeful development.

## Conclusion

I have argued, building on Hyde's concept of art as gift, that higher education can similarly be a gift. However, for this gift to unfold, we need to engage with two things: the political economy of higher education and a set of teaching pedagogies that can foster the gift. With respect to the political economy, I have argued that the commodification of higher education is not a helpful context for the gift to shine. While a higher education commons would provide the best context to foster the gift, such a political economy can only be made sustainable in a post-capitalist world. With respect to teaching practices, I have made a case for three pedagogical principles that are particularly important in this moment of crises. Teachers who create resonance, reflect on the relevance of their content, and stimulate imagination as a learning outcome are more likely to bring out and foster the gift.

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