

A Socialist Guide to Education Talk

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Education people negotiate their work through talk, from pedagogy to policy to punditry. This guide contains some insights on education talk from a socialist perspective, focusing on the terrain of education talk, practices I've found helpful as a socialist, and principles in the form of rules-of-thumb.

Principles

Education talk is inherently social, but there are different concepts of society, which philosophy helps us distinguish. A socialist concept of society is different than a liberal one. Liberals think that society is like a body or a contract or in some extreme cases nothing at all. I think the best analogy for a socialist concept of society is the game Jenga (which means structure in Swahili). The game features a series of stacked wood blocks, each exerting complex forces on one another in differential tension. There's a competition between two sides or teams, each trying to change the structure according to their vision without toppling it. For socialists, society is a structure made up of a complicated set of pieces related to one another through forces that change over time in a competition between capital and labor.

The two sides (more or less) compete over how the structure should be, taking it apart and putting it back together according to their interests. The Italian marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci called this the balance of forces. The structure itself has two main parts, a top and bottom. The bottom touches the ground and the top

provides cover. To socialists, the analogy translates like this: the bottom of the jenga set represents how we make material life out of resources, which represents economies. These exert an upwards force. The top exerts a downward force keeping things in place, which represents the state. An individual piece is a practice, or how individuals relate to one another in actions. Society isn't an entity just trying to keep equilibrium like a body or a language-based contract. It's a structure like a jenga set.

Education— by which we mean schooling institutions across the board— is part of the top, providing cover. But there are a lot of ways to provide cover. One of them is to maintain the continuity of certain practices over time: to make sure people get with the basic program. Schooling institutions make interventions to reproduce preferred structures. They do it in different ways, at different levels, and not always in concert. And of course, schooling institutions is just a small part of the larger jenga set, somewhere near the middle, characterized by a centering force impacting both the top and bottom. Education talk is a practice that exerts a kind of force.

If each piece in the jenga set is like a social practice, and education talk is a kind of practice, then all education talk happens in a struggle between groups in a balance of social forces. This means education people have to see talk in the context of competition, struggle, and contingency according to material interests and the impact of forces. Education talk is a fight to

some degree. There's no such thing as neutrality. Anything you say or do is part of the balance of forces (though not everything you say or do matters equally).

Like in jenga, the competition is to ensure your group's preferred structure holds in the balance of forces. Socialists tend to see two groups competing in societies where capitalism is a dominant structure: people who have their hands on capital and people who don't. These two groups, no matter how nice or smart or altruistic their members are, always compete over the structure because they have fundamentally contradictory interests. Education talk happens in the context of this conflict.

Of course this means that certain people are your adversaries. Some will be happy to speak in ways that uphold a structure preferred by people who have their hands on capital. You might even prefer that. A socialist wouldn't. Rather, a socialist would speak in ways that will weaken and transform a capitalist social structure into one where most people have their hands on wealth. Expecting competition in this regard, comfortable with tension, the socialist perspective would see deliberative-rational equilibrium through reasonable talk a little hard to believe, and ultimately less effective.

Education talk influences and is influenced by this struggle. When engaging in education talk you should remember that the goal is to ensure that your preferred structure holds. The point is to compete until your adversary is subdued, but not eliminated personally. That's the difference between having adversaries and having

enemies. The question becomes who wants what kind of structure and how to talk in ways that subdue, prohibit, convince, or confuse adversaries; inform, maneuver, and build with those who might share your same vision. Highlighting this binary between allies and adversaries, historically socialists have used the word comrade to talk about the latter.

Important to mention that these comrades and adversaries manifest as individuals, but what makes an individual an adversary is not their individual personality or person, but rather the ideology their practices and consciousness advances. The goal is to subdue practices and consciousnesses, not individuals.

Obviously similarities and differences come into the picture. You might share some similarities with someone when engaging in education talk. But what makes them an adversary is the kind of structure they're working to maintain. You can be perfectly nice and pleasant to them personally, but actively fight to subdue the ideology they advance in their practices (though some take this personally). Plenty of friends are adversaries. Some even get married. They still disagree vehemently.

Intersectionality is one of the better ways to think about differences. We used to think about differences in a siloed way: race, gender, class, ability, etc. After the Combahee River Collective's famous statement and the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, now we know these differences combine and mutually constitute into positions. Finding unity in these differences between comrades is one of the hardest, most important projects. To do this, or any

of the things socialists want to do, talking is important. You have to talk to organize, to think through analysis, to understand the terrain.

In general, from a socialist perspective, the bottom line is shifting the balance of forces towards less oppressive, exploitative social structures— namely, a structure where most people have their hands on wealth. Education talk is no exception. In education talk, first it's important to understand how school institutions fit into social structures, what kinds of force its practices exert, and then find ways of talking that find the right tensions and pressure points to shift the balance. Educational talk supports, reproduces, confirms, negotiates, clarifies, pushes, rejects, counter-pressures, confuses, misinterprets, unplugs, inhibits, disinhibits...interventions made by groups to maintain preferred structures in and around school institutions.

Practices

As a socialist I've found a number of practices helpful in education talk. This section describes some of those practices so readers can implement them.

Creative memoir writing and analysis - interpellations

Slowing down and paying close attention to who says what, how something is said, and the details about the context is crucial for thinking about education talk. I often journal about moments that stand out to me in education, honing a kind of political perception by focusing on mannerisms, habits, tones of voice, feelings, and exact

phrasing. These moments— whether direct confrontations between individuals like disciplinary actions or group experiences with systems like tracking— are concrete ways people get with the program of society, or interpellations. I'm a teacher-educator responsible for teaching teachers about school's social context. In classes I teach, and when I supervise student teachers, I ask teachers to write creatively— with narrative and descriptive detail— about the experiences they have each day to see how ideology permeates education. In particular I start the semester with a creative writing activity where I ask students to write for five minutes describing the details of a mundane object, like a water bottle. I then ask them to write with the same detail about a moment in their day at school. They keep a journal with these descriptions throughout the semester and we use them for seeing how ideology happens in education, particularly in what's said and done. The activity is good when thinking about education talk as a socialist, but also as a way of pointing to the ideological quality of any education talk. Everything from routine practices like lining up to active shooter drills to taking attendance have ideological significance. One anecdote that sticks in my memory is a teacher in my class who analyzed the ideology of asking her first grade students to pretend their mouths were full of ping-pong balls when walking down the hallway to prevent them from speaking.

Off balance practice (being embodied)

Education happens in a social context which, for a socialist, means a struggle between groups with competing interests

and power positions. Education talk is caught up in this struggle, so it's good to practice feeling off-balance. At a recent workshop called "Socialists Healing from Whiteness," the facilitator had participants engage in an activity that I think would be beneficial for anyone engaging in education talk as a socialist (but particularly anyone who structurally benefits from racial and other identity markers).

The workshop approached racial justice organizing from an embodied perspective. So much engagement with racial hierarchies happens in the head with analysis, critique, concepts, etc. Yet many responses to hierarchies are upheld by physiological responses. A more embodied approach has become popular in racial justice organizing, training activists to pay closer attention to their emotions, physical responses, and other feelings when it comes to hierarchies like race. The off-balance practice mimics the flight-fight-freeze type response a person has at the physiological level when encountering difference along racial hierarchies.

A pair of people do the activity. Each person stands shoulder to shoulder with the other, legs shoulder width apart. One person then rests a hand on the other's shoulder and pushes slowly. When the person being pushed feels their center of gravity tip, when they have the sense that they're just about to fall over, the pushed person nods to the pushing person, who then keeps their hand where it is and continues the pressure at that level for one minute. Each person pays close attention to how they feel. In particular, the pushed person should get to know their own reactions, feelings, and inner world while

being pushed off balance. Socialists tend to think that society is made up of disparate forces that act on people as individuals and groups. The activity simulates what happens in the body when confronted with these kinds of forces.

When I did this activity at the workshop it was a powerful lesson in how responses to being off balance are embodied. The facilitator then asked us to imagine different situations where racial difference was an aspect of an interaction: confronting a racist action, being in spaces where you're the minority or majority, or talking with people of different races. The physical experience coupled with the more conceptual reflection would be very helpful for socialists engaging in education talk, since education is fraught with inequalities and social forces like racial hierarchy.

Nonviolent communication

If education talk is always caught up in social conflict, then knowing how to deal with conflict is essential. Marshall Rosenberg's nonviolent communication is a great resource. Rosenberg's general framework is that conflicts are largely based on individual needs. People need certain things and they attempt to get these things, but can't or get frustrated. The problem is that people don't know what they need and so they lash out or swallow their needs, leading to further conflict and lack of clarity. Knowing what you need is therefore an important practice, but also being able to find out what others need when navigating situations where conflict is more pronounced is important as well. This sometimes means asking "what do you need

right now?” directly, but can require other more subtle kinds of questions.

Another famous staple of non-violent communication is the I-statement. Mixing rational and emotional communication, the statement presents someone in a situation of pronounced conflict with fewer opportunities to misunderstand. The typical formula is “When you [behavior no one can reasonably deny] I feel [emotion] because [reason].”

Reflecting back

It can be staggering how different understandings can be of what’s said and done. One practice that can help maintain clarity is reflecting back. Two people working through something difficult sit across from one another. Sometimes a third person is present to make suggestions or corrections. One person talks about their perspective, but slowly. After every sentence, the other person has to say “I hear you saying that...” and repeats the exact same wording that the other person used. When the repeater changes a word or phrasing, the speaker has the opportunity to correct them. “I actually said X and not Y.” Both people take turns speaking and listening/repeating. It takes a long time but the practice points out very clearly where interpretations diverge.

Creating situations

But not all education talk should look to resolve thorny interpersonal conflicts or matters of interpretation. Socialists know that history happens through conflict, when pressures and counter-pressures encounter one another. When social forces are in

tension with one another, something new can emerge that takes aspects of every force but is different than any of them. Education talk should therefore also exacerbate tensions sometimes, heightening conflicts when they manifest contradictory social forces.

Myles Horton, one of the co-founders of the historic Highlander Folk School (a place for organizers to learn and study together), called this “creating situations.” As a young man in the 1920s, Horton worked for the YMCA. He organized both Black and white churches, but as an antiracist he wanted to transgress the racial hierarchies of the Appalachian south where he worked. One year he held an end-of-the-year event for all YMCA members, inviting them for a dinner at a segregated hotel’s restaurant in Nashville. When Black and white young people arrived and sat down at the banquet tables, the head waiter refused to serve the food on orders from the hotel’s owners, who disagreed with integration. Horton insisted to the head waiter that he’d paid all the bills for labor and food, arranged for the transportation, etc.. Young people sat with one another and talked in this unprecedented situation, getting hungry and looking around at the management, wondering why the food wasn’t being served. The racist bosses had to figure out what to do. Eventually Horton won and a groundbreaking integrated dinner happened. The racist social structure upheld by the wealthy owners had to learn to deal with the situation. Education talk should aim to create these kinds of situations.

A teacher I used to work used a tactic with entitled parents who came to see

him during parent-teacher conferences (he taught at an elite private school). He knew the parents that would try to make deals or get around his tough grading standards. His classroom had pupil desks (chairs with tables attached), and he arranged a right-hand desk very close to a left-hand desk. The parents had to squeeze into the desks and sit very close to one another while they met with him. He created tension for the entitled, throwing them off balance by using the furniture in his classroom.

Jenga listening/speaking

Horton had a similar approach to listening and asking questions. I like to think of his approach as jenga listening and speaking. During discussions, he'd listen carefully for the major tensions or inconsistencies happening in a conversation. He'd then craft a question that would expose these tensions, or put them directly in conflict with one another for everyone participating in the conversation, and wait for the right moment to ask the question. He wanted what he said to shift the balance of forces in the strategy discussion towards clearer understanding for action. Like a jenga player, he listened for the weak points, the pressure points, the places where multiple aspects of the issue under discussion grinded against one another, and only spoke when he could ask a question that would illuminate those tensions for the group.

80/20 listening

Labor organizers, particularly the collective Labor Notes, often recommend 80/20 listening. That means the organizer should listen 80% of the time and speak 20% when

doing organizing conversations. It's a helpful numerical label. In education talk, it can be helpful also. Another way of thinking about this is, during conversation, going for a mix of moves: paying attention to the kind of things you're saying and pivoting between them by asking questions, offering comments, silent response, etc, agreement, joking, phatics (mmm, ahh, or hmmm) rather than always responding with closed comments or long speeches.

Bulldozing

But sometimes you need to take up space and run over your listeners, particularly if they're adversaries. I have seen effective administrators find ways of speaking breathlessly, making their points over and over again, going back to certain details several times, telling stories, repeating the same words but with different inflections when trying to get what they want in meetings or conversations. At certain moments this is appropriate, but should be used sparingly, particularly by those whose identities might register as structurally beneficial.

To sum up, I've gestured here towards a way of thinking about education talk that is socialist, and written out some practices consistent with that way of thinking. With respect to socialism, or those invested in this cause, what I've presented above are some ways of promoting dialogue in keeping with the value system. For those who want more information socialism, I intend this essay as a welcoming gesture rather than an exhaustive account or definition. Finally, for those for whom socialism doesn't resonate I hope to offer a

way of thinking about the links between methods and values. Practices overflow ideology to some degree, and anyone with any kind of politics can try these practices and see if they work. I'd like to suggest, however, that they enact and manifest socialism in education talk.