

Activism as a pedagogical resource

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ABSTRACT

In this text, the promises of activism as pedagogical resource in higher education are discussed. What are the pedagogical promises of activism in higher education? How can we as teachers create a space for activism when designing courses and in our teaching practices? Based on our experience as teachers, scholars, and activists in higher education, we propose that activism could be used as a pedagogical resource that cater for students' engagement in the "real" world matters. It could be grounded in a pedagogy of hope, community, and collectivism. Activism in higher education is an act of resistance to dominant forces of capitalism, consumption, patriarchy, hyper-individualism and postcolonialism that historically have and still influence higher education. Used as a pedagogical resource it allows us to recognize students as well as ourselves as teachers and scholars as political subjects.

Author Keywords

Activism; higher education; societal issues, pedagogical resource, politics, democracy, collective

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INTRODUCTION

Students are not just "students" but also political subjects. As political subjects, they are confronted with, suffering from, and act on the consequences of political highly anti-democratic matters, such as racism, sexism, social injustice, migration, global warming, climate changes. Students' engagement in burning societal issues on social media platforms and participation in social movements can be seen as acts of resistance towards discriminatory practices and environmental crisis. Students' engagement and activism may also reflect their personal and social engagement for democracy and the collective good.

As activists, teachers, and scholars within the Swedish higher education system, we are interested in activism as a pedagogical resource, a "communicative resource" that enable higher education to intervene in and respond to societal problems. A communicate resource, do not just support practices and skills limited to theorizing and analyzing society, but values actionable and collective practices. As communicative resource, activism would bridge the gap between academia and the society, with the aim to change the norms and structures within society. The classroom will take place in the world, and the world is a classroom [1]

In this text, we take the opportunity to reflect on and discuss some questions: What are the pedagogical promises of activism in higher education? How can we as teachers create a space for activism when designing

courses and in our teaching practices? How can we facilitate for political subject in an a-political world? Our wider reflection concerns the longstanding relationship between activism and academia [2].

A market thinking perspective

In our department 'Media technology', we have been involved in courses that explore and work with societal issues such as inclusivity, democracy, and social engagement. These courses frame technology and design within a societal context, analyzing and grounding design challenges in "real" social problems to solve. These courses serve as great examples on how to bridge the gap between society "out there" and the academia "in there". Still, we have observed that societal and political issues are not students' first choices, when they are to choose their topic for their final exam projects. This may be because theories and ideas in the course literature, often are characterized by a market thinking perspective where design is about the innovation of products rather than social innovation. Furthermore, students' choices may be informed by academic criteria and standards where the individual student's analytical skills are in addressed. Their choices may also be informed by market driven values that value design competences and "employability", rather than their ability to collaboratively infrastructure resources for a common good.

The tools we teach

We mean that students own practices and experiences of activism should be welcomed in higher education, as activism speak directly to student's personal and social engagement on societal issues. In recent years, we have witness how activism to counter grotesque acts of racism and sexual harassments have sparked the actions and engagement of millions of people. Stories and images are spread and shared as hashtags in social media (for example, #Black Lives matters, #Metoo) to share common experiences of oppressions ¹[2]. The environmental movement has, for long made use of social media to engage a broad public around substantive issues [3]–[5]. Other examples of activism where social media has played a central role include the Arab Spring [6], [7] the Occupy Movement [8], and more local movement as legalizing same-sex marriage in Taiwan [9]; the Gezi protests in Turkey [10], Ukraine's Euromaidan Uprising [11], Indignados movement in Spain [12], the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong [13], [14]and the Save KPK movement in Indonesia [15].

The tools for activism, the infrastructure that enables the more "liquid" organization [16], which characterizes this type of activism, are also what educations revolve around. Therefore, we cannot distinguish the tools from what they infrastructure, but should also see political activism as an integrated part of the tools we teach.

The myth of the apolitical education

We are aware that our ideas clash with the idea of the apolitical academia, free from political and economic interests. But how objective and neutral are higher education really? A study of the epistemic infrastructure such as curricula, syllabi, classrooms structures in Computer Science, points to the direction that the epistemic infrastructure of abstraction foster anti-political students. The epistemic, culture and ideology

serve as a wall to integrate critical technology studies in that discipline [17]

Activism as a pedagogical resource

So, what are the promises of activism in higher education? We see activism as a pedagogical resource that cater for students' engagement, actions, participation, and responses to societal and political problems that exist both within and outside academia. Furthermore, activism in higher education is an act of resistance to dominant forces of capitalism, consumption, patriarchy, hyper-individualism and postcolonialism that historically have and still influence higher education. Grounded in a pedagogy of hope, community and collectivism [1][18] teaching for activism would help us recognize students and ourselves as the political subjects that we are.

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¹ 10/09/2021 16:20:00

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