

# From Critical to Post-Critical Pedagogies

Conversation between SHAILOH PHILLIPS, ISKRA VUKŠIĆ & ROSA TE VELDE

Shailoh Phillips is a teacher with a particular interest in 'critical making'. After being home-schooled in Pennsylvania, US, Shailoh moved to the Netherlands when she was fourteen, where the education system initially alienated her. After studying cultural anthropology and philosophy, she worked in the cultural field in screenwriting, game design, and programme development. In 2017, she finished a Master of Education in Art at the Piet Zwart Institute, Rotterdam. In the past years she has been teaching design, photography, and social practices at the Willem de Kooning Academy (WdKA), Royal Academy of Arts (KABK), ArtEZ, and the Design Academy Eindhoven. She is also involved in grassroots informal education in makerspaces and at festivals. She has been involved in curriculum and teacher-training development as part of the Teaching Tools research group at KABK and the 'Rebellious Teaching' community in Berlin. She is also co-founder of SALWA, a community platform supporting artists with a migration background as they navigate the Dutch cultural sector.

**Rosa:** What does critical pedagogy mean to you? Why do you think it is important for education?

**Shailoh:** The term 'critical pedagogy' was coined initially by Paulo Freire in Brazil. There is, however, a much older school of thought in emancipatory pedagogies that he's building on. What he points to, similarly to his contemporary Ivan Illich, is the way in which education can reproduce hierarchies in society. Schools can actually be disempowering; instead of developing people's ability to speak and to think for themselves or with each other, it can actually condition them to conform and to obey, becoming compliant citizens and workers. This has a lot to do with the disciplinary nature of education. Who has the knowledge and who has the power? You rarely learn to challenge authority from your teachers.

What is school, anyway? Originally, the concept of *schola* in Latin refers to free time, or leisure. A place to meet outside of work, to learn and discuss. Now we live in times where universal public education is not only a right, but in many cases an obligation. It's quite miraculous actually, that it is considered a common thing that all citizens should have a basic education. Education is considered something that

everyone has to go through. As such, it is not only one of the 'great equalisers' in society; education is also akin to a factory mechanism of control, discipline, repetition, and conformity.

Riffing off of Gert Biesta in *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (2014), there are these two pitfalls that I think are very specific to the times we live in. On the one hand, there is a danger of thinking you can do and know anything; "The world revolves always around me, I'm the centre of the universe, and I can do whatever I want." This is the danger of this sort of self-centered arrogance, or lack of contextual sensitivity. On the other hand, there is the possibility, through confrontation with knowledge, of shrinking your sense of self and thinking, "I'm so small, I have nothing to say, I'm in the background." I call this self-effacing attitude a 'nevermind' approach – a disempowered, overwhelmed position. Critical pedagogy is about inviting people to navigate learning within these two extremes. We are neither overconfident and thinking we can do or know everything, nor are we so demotivated that we stop dreaming. In other words, we become relational people among our peers, aware of both our limits and our potential.

This has to do with a common understanding of 'critical', based on what French philosopher Paul Ricoeur calls 'a human hermeneutics of suspicion'. It's a paranoid attitude, in which we do not trust the world and how it appears, believing instead that there's something invisible, hidden, or deceptive that we need to tap into or uncover. This mode of thinking is something that's been with us across the world since the Enlightenment – a suspicion of religion, of big pharma, of mass media, of governments, and a suspicion of each other.

With all its value, being 'critical' can, in our times, accidentally leak into the territory of alt-right conspiracy theories, and people who no longer believe anything. The irony is that such a post-truth condition does not stem from a lack of criticism, but an overdose of it. The way I understand contemporary critical pedagogy is that for some people it has actually backfired and created more fragmentation in society, and a lack of understanding of what you're a part of. So I take recourse to an update of the term 'critical' that comes from Rita Felski, who is a literary scholar. She wrote a book called *The Limits of Critique* (2017), and edited a volume *Critique and Postcritique* (2017). Felski analyses this critical mode of thinking that is suspicious, and she identifies it as being based on two modes. One is digging down to things are not on the surface, and the other is standing back to find enough distance. But are there only two modalities; that the truth would be under the surface, or that it would be at a distance – what is missing from that? What's missing from that is a form of proximity and material engagement, but also the possibility of repair or reparative reading. So building on Rita Felski, but also on Eve Sedgwick and Irit Rogoff, I think it's interesting to move from the critical that is (mainly) suspicious or critique that is fault-finding – "what's wrong with this?"

– to what’s called *criticality*. Criticality is something that’s well-represented by Donna Haraway’s idea of ‘staying with the trouble’. In this idea of criticality, I don’t have to be super-, hyper-critical to be in the world; the world is already critical. We’re living in critical times. There’s climate catastrophe, there are urgent social movements, there are hierarchies of power at play that are there whether I’m critical of them or not.

In the past decades two parallel and contrary developments unfurled: 1) the political impotence of critical thinking, and 2) critical thinking spiralling into post-truth conspiracy thinking. So what does this post-trust and post-critique era ask of critical pedagogies? It’s all about cultivating a *relational* mode that allows you to be more critical of and curious about what’s going on, and to learn by hearing a multiplicity of voices from different positions. At the heart of critical pedagogy is finding your voice in relation to others. This includes questioning the assumption that critique would be something uniquely human, and that ‘critical’ people are somehow superior to others. The world is in multiple modes of slow crisis, and it doesn’t matter all that much if we are critical of it or not. What does matter is how we act, what we make, how we spend our time and money, and how we treat each other in the meantime.

**Iskra:** What is the role of critical theory in art and design schools according to you? And how do you practice critical pedagogy in your classes?

**Shailoh:** I find that critical theory is urgent and exciting to art and design students in a way that is different than it is to, for example, scholars in the humanities or philosophy. And I love that so much because it’s alive and it takes material form. There’s a freedom of thinking there that I find very exciting.

For me, ‘critical pedagogy’ means tuning in to where people are at and seeing what they need, it’s about finding the tools to help people understand the world without freaking out completely. This is a kind of care practice: to create a context where people can engage with the world and not become so overwhelmed that at some point they need to shut down and retreat. This attunement is something that is important when designing courses, but also when talking to people and facilitating conversations. It definitely does not mean that I’m the keeper of the truth, or that I will tell you how to see the world. But I will invite people to situations where we can learn from the world and from each other in different ways. I invite people to think for themselves in this, and to be challenged by each other. I try to always create a context where we’re confronted with other points of view or other ways of seeing things, and not to develop a monoculture.

I’m actually interested in bringing the tools and smuggling them into a context where they might not be called ‘critical pedagogy’.

They might be called ‘dialogue’, ‘curiosity’, ‘collective assembly’, or ‘workshop’. There’s a bit of camouflaging that goes on for me. Sometimes it can be more effective by not calling it ‘critical pedagogy’ – to practise without preaching.

**Iskra:** When you studied Education in Art at Piet Zwart Institute, you wrote your thesis on ‘tentacular pedagogy’. What do you mean by this?

**Shailoh:** Tentacular refers to the conceptual figure of the octopus. Different qualities of ‘tentacularity’ feed into how I think of pedagogy. One is having tentacles in multiple directions, so being able to sense danger or opportunity, with felt sense. One physical capability of the octopus that fascinates me is that it can put one tentacle inside a very small opening and see, “Can I fit through or not?” I think this is a very important skill to train as a teacher, to ask: “Is this assignment I have going to work with this group or not?” To sense how large you are as a teacher, and to be able to shape-shift, to change colours, too. And to always be on the lookout for fissures in the systems we are part of, which seem so monolithic and impenetrable. The octopus is an escape artist; there is almost always a way through.

Secondly, tentacularity has to do with questioning the hard-coded division between theory and practice that’s central to the current education system. Tentacular pedagogy is a way of bridging disciplines and divides within the educational structure as we know now, without creating a replacement structure; it’s cultivating a flexible repertoire within that and transforming through that. I think it’s fine to specialise in certain media, but as teachers, I think we need to be able to shift gears and levels in quite a nimble way.

**Rosa:** How do you ‘bring the world into the classroom’? What do you actually do?

**Shailoh:** Something I’ve done as a teacher, in the context of courses that I teach for enrolled students, is open up the class to participants who are not from the academy. People who are not in that ‘bubble’. It creates situations where people are confronted with, and have to work together with, people who are, for example, craftspeople, or non-native speakers of English, or mechanics, or gardeners, things like this, to create a context where you actually share the knowledge and the processes to break out of this class bubble. If you look at critical theory as a form of cultural capital, like having the words and being able to explain things, having that in your repertoire is quite helpful for many people. So I do try to make it accessible by doing close readings of texts for positioning discourse, learning where things come from, and discussing things. I try to create entrance portals into this more exclusionary realm of knowledge.

## SHAILOH PHILLIPS

I also try to take people out of the academy as much as possible for embodied and situated lessons. When we're talking about law, we go to a courtroom; when we're talking about shipping, we go to the harbour. You learn things from places and materials, just as you do from people. And I think if you stay within the academy walls, you'll never learn these things.

**Iskra:** How can we facilitate learning for educators? How can we do it together in collaboration, and why should we do it in collaboration, and also how do we set up these infrastructures to create a learning institution?

**Shailoh:** Often in academies there's very little time for exchange between teachers. As a teacher you have a lot of power in the classroom with a group of students; you could sit there and eat pizza and no one would know!

I take a cue from the educator Jorge Lucero, who's an artist-educator based in Chicago and originally from Mexico. He looks at pedagogy as a form of art, and the materiality of that is the classroom, the institution, the conversations you have. I find it so fantastic to look at a classroom setting as a material setting and to think about the tensions and resistances, and to look at how you're shaping that. It's helped me a lot to think about teaching as a creative process. It excites me to design a new course. And I do think it's important to stay inspired as a teacher, because if teachers are actually uninterested in the topic, students feel that.

**Rosa:** You're part of various conversations and groups with other people and educators, which is crucial because it also keeps you inspired and keeps you going, but you do it in your own time. Exchanging in a more formalised (and paid) way with colleagues is sometimes experienced as unsafe, especially when you're on a temporary contract. How to balance this?

**Shailoh:** The main question I have is why is it unsafe for teachers to talk about their questions – what happened there? Instead of feeling supported, you feel monitored; it's a toxic environment. The type of teacher-training pilot we're doing at KABK is a support structure for teachers. It is not a job performance review, but it is a space to enjoy your work and to be equipped to do what you've been asked to do and to learn new skills. I could not understand if teachers were not interested in that, because what are your ambitions as a teacher if you're not interested in becoming a better teacher?

At the schools I taught at last year, these types of teacher-trainings and support structures have been lacking. In fact, I even wonder in the Netherlands right now, what is the educational model and what are the assumptions we are operating on? I feel like we're in a transition

## FROM CRITICAL TO POST-CRITICAL PEDAGOGIES

phase. Even though there's a lot going on, it's not coherent. Even the teacher-training programmes at a master's level... It's a sandbox, but not a method or in-depth training programme. I'm not saying there should be only one way of doing it, but I am surprised. Education is critical in the art field and yet there's such a lack of coherence and vision. I think it's quite irresponsible to think that being an artist or a designer is the same as being a teacher. A lot of toxic behaviour comes from not understanding that teaching is also a skill that you need to develop. You need time, feedback, and context for that.

When you have no training, you tend to be more traditional because you tend to default to the kind of education you received yourself. I think that pedagogical training can increase the diversity of practices, allowing for more playful and participatory modes. I think that's the thing to remember; you're being paid to be there and have a lot of autonomy when deciding topics, so it worries me to see so many teachers feeling so disempowered while being in a position of so much power. You're more likely to do harm of some kind when you're supposed to be empowered educating people, but feel disempowered yourself.

**Iskra:** In an interview with you and some of your KABK colleagues in *Der Greif*, you talk about the distinction between 'training' and 'education', suggesting that many young photographers are simply trained to participate in the system of awards and festivals, rather than 'educated'.<sup>(1)</sup> Can you say something about the difference?

**Shailoh:** I used to be interested in creating a very free space for students, asking them: "Well, what do you want to learn?" But through working with vulnerable communities, for example with people with refugee backgrounds, I realised the paradox of freedom and constraints. Too much free space can be a huge burden on participants, because it's not clear what they're participating in. So I've become more comfortable with 'training' programmes that slowly release and negotiate power structures, instead of becoming a free-for-all. As Jo Freeman discusses in *The Tyranny of Structurelessness* (1972), democratising every little thing can actually reproduce hierarchies. She reflects on the ways in which feminist groups have resisted informal, loose structures and instead have called for a degree of formalisation in order to create accountability and shared responsibility in a group. Instead of throwing people in at the deep end, there is this incremental process of freedom. But it is important to remember that perspective, because it's very tempting to enjoy and cling to the control you have as a teacher.

**Iskra:** How does the context of the classroom relate to the institution? Or what are the strategies or starting points you've identified for teaching in the institution?

## SHAILOH PHILLIPS

**Shailoh:** I find it increasingly uncomfortable to try to teach emancipatory pedagogies within hierarchical art schools. Imagine teaching Social Practices, and then being in a manager's meeting that undermines everything you've been working on. How can we embrace decolonial practices in a school that's trying to be 'apolitical'? This friction became painfully apparent after students and teachers called for institutional solidarity after the recent outbreak of violence in Palestine and Israel.<sup>(2)</sup> In Rotterdam, the school even started reinforcing a ban on certain kinds of political expression. I'm finding myself increasingly uncomfortable with this type of hypocrisy. They offer courses in, for example, Social Practices, but then want to keep the school as an 'apolitical space'? If we talk about decolonisation, we also have to talk about what that means for the hierarchy of the school.

When it comes to challenging the academy, I think it's important to be willing to create some friction, or hold a space with your body, and to create an infrastructure between students and teachers. This requires the willingness to be uncomfortable, to even be disobedient, and to find the right tonality in that; perhaps not getting yourself fired but taking a position that's on the borderline of that which creates a buffer for students. And then also there's letter writing, organising conversations, and other practical things to be done, but I think the practice of occupation and physical presence is a form of protest, which I think is also a form of pedagogy. It's speaking back to a power system and, as such, there's a teaching element to it, if well-designed.

(1) Gita Cooper-van Ingen, 'Q&A featuring Broomberg & Chanrain, Donald Weber & Shailoh Phillips', in: *Der Greif*, 25 February, 2019. Accessed through: <https://dergreif-online.de/special/qa-with-kabk-ma-photography/>.

(2) See the open letter (May 2021): <https://www.ipetitions.com/petition/double-standards-on-free-palestine-banner-at>; student Diana Al-Halabi's instagram account: <https://www.instagram.com/diana.al.halabi/>; Iman Ganji, 'Protesting settler colonialism in the neoliberal university', in: *Roar Magazine*, 9 August, 2021. Accessed through: <https://roarmag.org/essays/palestine-solidarity-neoliberal-university/>.

