The Conversation

A place for sharing and discussing ideas about education

Dany-Jack Mercier 2012
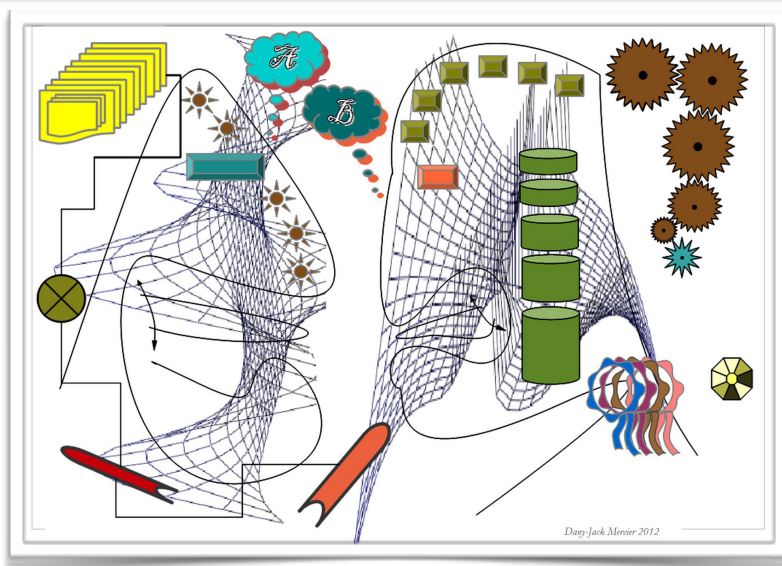
Welcome to the conversation

At **The Conversation** we believe that giving educators the space and time to talk about teaching and learning is essential.

Conversations can generate ideas, inform pedagogies and inspire reform. A conversation implies a measure of equality and that listening and sharing without limit, without judgement, without inhibition can lead to incredible things. Conversations allow us to explore ideas, to challenge and ask questions of ourselves, each other and the systems we work in. They allow us to create, analyse and evaluate ideas. They allow us to engage intellectually with the latest research and make links between theories and praxes. Conversations can lift us, excite us and challenge us. So join in the conversation!

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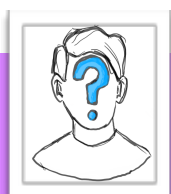
QUESTION

Questions can kick start conversations. They ask us to think, respond and converse. Be curious, ask questions.

CONVERSATION

If you would like to join in with our physical conversations email
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Each issue we will pose a new question
This time we ask **"What is the purpose of education?"**

Our responses
Professor Noam Chomsky reminds us of the urgency of education in an exclusive article

Professor Rozelle-Stone wants to counteract the achievement society

Professor O'Donnell says schools must give up the myth of success

How would you answer?
We would love to hear from you. Send us a response to…

submit@theconversation.education

OP-ED

In this issue of The Conversation we ask "What is the purpose of education?" There are of course many ways to answer this questions.

In a 2013 TED Talk Sir Ken Robinson says that the purpose of education is learning. "The whole point of education is to get people to learn." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wX78iKhlnsc)

"The whole point of education is to get people to learn."

How many of our conversations in schools, colleges, universities are about learning? How many of our meetings have learning as the main agenda item? Do we talk about the learning of our students enough? (And by the way, it is my opinion that discussion and analysis of progress data of one sort or another is *NOT* talking about the learning of students.) If then, we are not talking about learning, why not? And does this mean that we are wasting time and effort on things that are less important or subservient to learning?

But, after all that, we must still address the question of what we actually are trying to get our students to learn. OFSTED chief Amanda Spielman has recently discussed moving the mindset of inspections away from focussing on exam results and towards considering the curriculum offer a school provides. "Ultimately, the curriculum is the yardstick for what school leaders want their pupils to know and to be able to do by the time they leave school. It is therefore imperative that the new inspection framework has curriculum as a central focus." (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-45560165)

Well that is nice but she doesn't seem to be offering any guidance on what that curriculum offer should be. It seems that schools will have to justify their choices as to what they want their students to learn as well as their performance data.

"So what should our students learn?"

So what should our students learn? I think that the answer to that question depends on your educational philosophy. See our section on some different philosophies on page 6.

For me the need is urgent (see Prof. Noam Chomsky page 4). We must teach our students to be critical thinkers with the ability to question those in authority, to have the ability *NOT* to swallow anything and everything they read, hear or see in this post truth era. We must teach them to be creative, independent, resilient and optimistic. How we do that is another question.

editor@theconversation.education

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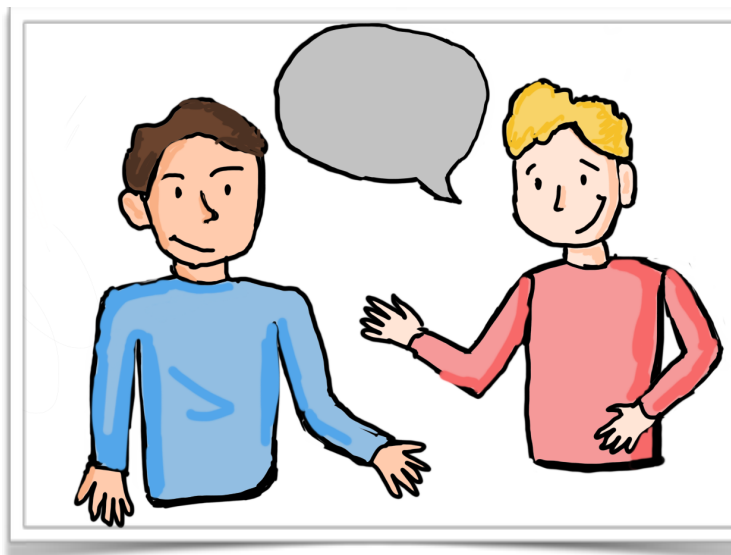
JOIN IN THE CONVERSATION

The conversation is all about bringing people together and talking. Asking a question is a good way to begin a conversation. This semester we ask **"What is the purpose of education?"**. Clearly there are many possible ideas and views one could answer with or argue about, but that's the point, it gets the conversation going.

We would love to hear your ideas. If you would like to submit a written response (of around 500 words) please email us at **submit@theconversation.education** or visit **www.theconversation.education**

Conversations need not happen face to face but it sometimes is just really nice to sit round a table and talk. If you would like to join in with one of our conversations in person the please let us know. Email **info@theconversation.education** or visit **www.theconversation.education** for more details.

Do you agree with the ideas discussed by our contributors? Maybe you completely disagree. Either way we want you to talk about it! Let us know your thoughts, discuss them with your colleagues, debate them with your friends. Have a conversation.

So come on, dive in and join the conversation!

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The Urgency of Education

Professor Noam Chomsky

This piece was written exclusively for the Applied Minds Teaching School Conference 2018

We are living at a unique moment in human history. This generation must decide whether organised human society will survive. The problem cannot be evaded, and decisions cannot be delayed.
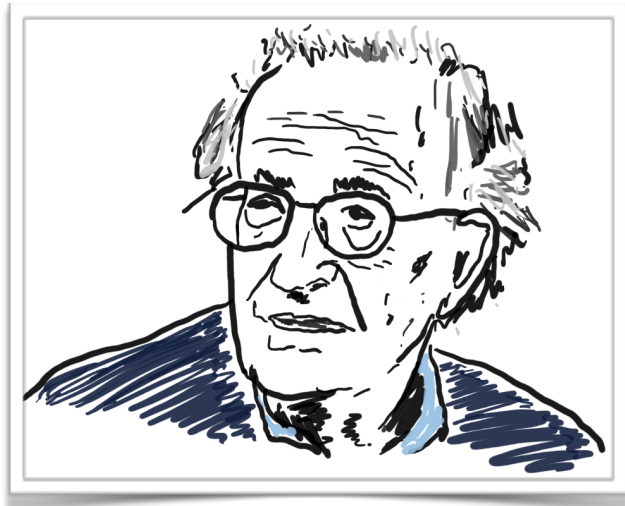
Last January, the famous Doomsday Clock of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists was moved forward to two minutes to midnight. This is the closest it has been to terminal disaster since it was first set in 1947, at the dawn of the nuclear age. The clock was then set at 7 minutes to midnight - halcyon days by our standards. Only once before has it reached the two-minute mark: in 1953, when the US and then the USSR exploded thermonuclear weapons, revealing that human intelligence, in its glory, had devised the means to destroy everything.

The January announcement cited the two existential crises that threaten human survival: the growing threats of nuclear war and environmental catastrophe. Both intensifying as a result of human action, and inaction. Not just human survival: other species are disappearing at a rate not seen since the Fifth Extinction 65 million years ago, when a huge asteroid hit the Earth, ending the age of the dinosaurs and opening the path for mammals, ultimately the one that is now implementing the Sixth Extinction.
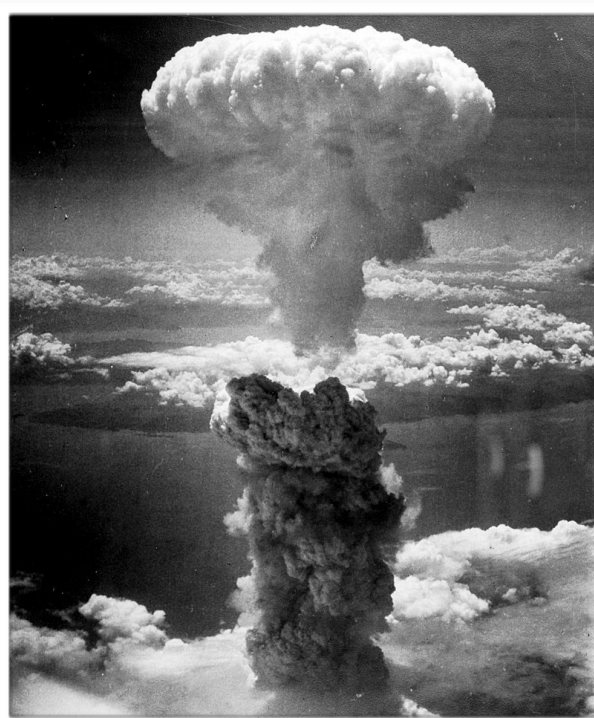
This familiar with the shocking record of the nuclear age can only be amazed that we have survived thus far, and there is little reason to expect that miracles will persist. As for environmental catastrophe, the signs are already evident, and expectations are grim. Current scientific studies conclude that by 2100, seas are likely to rise at least 3 to 5 feet, with utterly devastating consequences.

The most astounding fact of human history, in my opinion, is that the most powerful state in history, with incomparable advantages, has not only withdrawn from global efforts to address this crisis but is n fact devoting every effort to accelerate the race to destruction. In part this is pure cynicism. The leadership is well aware of what is happening. While rejecting global warming as a "hoax", President Trump applied for a permit to build a huge wall to protect his Irish golf course from rising seas,, and he is not alone in behaving at a moral level for which words are lacking. In part, it is blind prejudice or sheer ignorance, in part fostered by political leaders. In the US, half

of Republicans deny that what is happening is happening, and of the half that recognise that the real world exists, barely half think that humans may have something to do with global warming.

It is hard to imagine a more shattering condemnation of a failed educational system. It has many flaws. One is that in recent years it is increasingly based on a model of education condemned by thinkers of the Enlightenment, who ridiculed the idea that teaching should be similar to pouring water into a vessel - a very leaky vessel as we all know. That is the favoured model for an educational system based on teaching-to-test, a model that has victimised many children in the past and now largely dominates American education - at least what remains of it, as funding declines along with teacher salaries and work conditions.

This single example alone serves to illustrate graphically the critical importance of creating an educational system, from Kindergarten through Graduate School, that will encourage independence of thought, creative exploration of both the outer and inner worlds, and internalising basic human values as second nature. This has always been the primary objective of those concerned with human rights and needs. And the commitment, always urgent, has now become a precondition for decent human survival.

Considered the founder of modern linguistics, Noam Chomsky is one of the most cited scholars in modern history. He has received numerous awards, including the Kyoto Prize in Basic Sciences, the Helmholtz Medal and the Ben Franklin Medal in Computer and Cognitive Science. Chomsky has not only transformed the field of linguistics, his work has influenced fields such as cognitive science, philosophy, psychology, computer science, mathematics, childhood education, and anthropology. Chomsky is also one of the most influential public intellectuals in the world. He has written more than 100 books, his most recent being "Requiem for the American Dream: The 10 Principles of Concentration of Wealth & Power."

https://linguistics.arizona.edu/user/noam-chomsky

Watch a fascinating film by Michel Gondry about Noam Chomsky called "Is the man who is tall happy?"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cv66xFD7s7g

Philosophies of education

The Conversation is about the promotion of talk between education colleagues. We aim to spark conversations with this magazine. Clearly there is limited space here to do justice to the immense field of educational philosophy but we do hope that this brief foray will prompt you to find out more and talk to your colleagues about your own philosophy of education.

There are different ways to approach the taxonomy of educational philosophies. One method of classification is to say there are three main branches of educational philosophy; teacher centred, student centred and society centred philosophies.

Teacher Centred Philosophies:

Essentialism is the idea that students should be taught the essential skills that have been proven over time to be necessary for society.

Perennialism is the teaching of things that society deem to be everlastingly important. The focus is primarily on teaching reasoning and wisdom rather than facts, the liberal arts rather than vocational training.

Student Centred Philosophies:

Progressivism hopes to develop a moral compass in students by acknowledging we are social animals who learn best with other people. Many follow a process based on John Dewey's model of learning known as "the pattern of inquiry".

Humanism is about helping each student reach their full potential. In humanism, learning is student centred and personalised, and the educator's role is that of a facilitator.

Constructivism posits that education should be used to mould a students world view so they can become progressive agents of social change. Students build their knowledge and understanding actively rather than teachers using a dilative approach.

Society Centred Philosophies:

Reconstructivism is a philosophy that emphasises the addressing of social questions and a quest to create a better society and worldwide democracy. Reconstructionist educators focus on a curriculum that highlights social reform as the aim of education.

Behaviourism looks to cultivate behaviours that are beneficial to society. Students as seen as *tabula rasa* and behaviour can be shaped through positive and negative reinforcement.
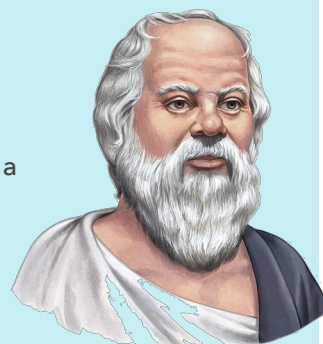
Other Educational Ideologies to consider:

Other notable ideologies of educational philosophy include **Nationalism**, **American Exceptionalism**, **Ethno-nationalism**, **Liberalism**, **Conservatism**, and **Marxism**. Please note this is *NOT* an exhaustive list

The Sociological Perspective:

 Sociologists and educators also debate the ***function*** of education. Three main functions emerge.

Functionalist Theory focuses on the way education serves the needs of society.

Conflict Theory sees the purpose of education as maintaining social inequality and preserving the power of those who dominate society.

Symbolic Interactionist Theory limit analysis of education to what can be directly observed in the classroom. The focus is on how teacher expectations influence student performance, perceptions, and attitudes.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy_of_education
https://www.theedadvocate.org/5-things-that-educators-should-know-about-the-philosophy-of-education/
https://www.cliffsnotes.com/study-guides/sociology/education/theories-of-education

Countering the Achievement Society

Professor Rebecca Rozelle-Stone

Associate Professor of Philosophy at University of North Dakota

(reproduced with permission)
https://iainews.iai.tv/articles/should-we-rediscover-education-as-leisure-auid-1109

It has almost become a cliché to characterize the time in which we live as the Age of Burnout. An increasing number of books, articles, and opinion editorials are being written on the subject of "the epidemic of vital exhaustion" (see for example, *The Guardian*'s recent piece, https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/feb/21/how-burnout-became-a-sinister-and-insidious-epidemic). My own interest and research into fatigue stems in large part from my work and observations in a university setting, where a common complaint (or perhaps boast?) of faculty, staff, administrators, and students is how exhausted we are. But fatigue is often linked to a host of other problems, including depression and anxiety, physical ailments, addiction issues, and in general, joylessness and a sense of alienation from one's family, friends, community, and from oneself as a whole person.

Students are frequently the focus of a university's efforts to (re)invigorate energies, prove the institution's vitality, and increase the measurable outcomes for "success," against the persistent threats of depletion of motivation,

withdrawal, and perceived (or real) failure. Many of the attempts to enhance "student success" are technical or technological, like new software programs to track students' grades, to analyze other "predictors" of their "outcomes," and to send them automatic notifications indicating their grade-slippage in classes (as if regularly alerting them to their deficiencies will somehow generate greater motivation to achieve).

I would propose a more radical solution for cultivating successful students in our Burnout Age. Recalling that 'radical' stems from the Latin *radicalis*, 'of or having roots', my proposal is one that returns to fundamental roots of our humanity and of learning. It is also radical in the sense that it sounds quite simple, minimalist, and non-technological: I want to attend to *leisure* and its central place in the humane university.

In this reflection, I will first briefly describe some of the context contributing to fatigue and burnout in today's students. Second, I will explain what I

mean by "leisure," and why I think it should be a central component in what might be called the "humane university" that genuinely nourishes student flourishing. And finally, I will describe a few of my own modest attempts to incorporate leisure in my classes, along with a cautionary note.

The Achievement Society and Fatigue

Consider these words from the 20th century French philosopher-social activist-mystic, Simone Weil, whom I have spent much of my academic career thinking and writing about. In an essay on school studies, she wrote:

''The intelligence can only be led by desire. For there to be desire, there must be pleasure and joy in the work. The intelligence only grows and bears fruit in joy. The joy of learning is as indispensable in study as breathing is in running. Where it is lacking there are no real students, but only poor caricatures of apprentices who, at the end of their apprenticeship, will not even have a trade.''

Unfortunately, from the many conversations I've had with students over the past 15 years, inside and outside of class, in addition to the many *Chronicle of Higher Education* articles devoted to the subject, I have concluded that many university students today do not experience much desire, pleasure, or joy in relation to their studies. Rather, they report being consumed with stress, economic and social anxiety, and fatigue in the face of countless and growing demands.

There are material worries, like: *How will I pay rent (or pay back these student loans)?* And there are existential crises that arise from the sense of never doing or being enough in the face of an unrelenting "achievement society": *How can I possibly manage to complete these four research papers, and fulfill the obligations of my internship, and keep up with emails, and attend to my friend who is suffering from a breakup, and participate in this important protest march, and get a few hours of sleep this week?* While we need to address the rising costs of tuition and the economic hardships students face through greater fiscal transparency and responsibility, I want to focus on the second set of concerns, which affects nearly all students, regardless of university costs or setting.
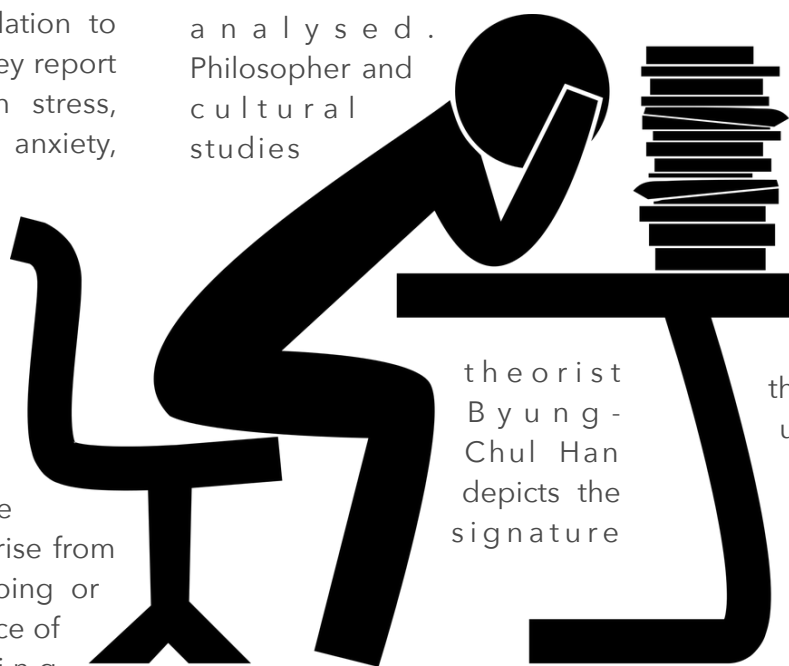
I see this situation of fatigue as being typical for many of us (perhaps especially for university students) in this century, and the effects of being overwrought are already being documented and analysed. Philosopher and cultural studies theorist Byung-Chul Han depicts the signature pathologies marking our 21st century landscape as being "neurological illnesses such as depression, ADHD, borderline personality disorder, and burnout syndrome". He goes on to say that what is characteristic of these maladies is that "they indicate an excess of positivity, that is, not negation so much as the inability to say no". Such subjects are not suffering from restriction or prohibition, but a "being-able-to-do-everything." But of course, the reality is that one cannot do everything; and the aspiration toward and the sense of limitless possibilities for accomplishment are not experienced as freedom but as impending failure and paralysis. As Han presciently notes, "The complaint of the depressive individual, 'Nothing is possible,' can only occur in a society which thinks, 'Nothing is impossible'". In this context, possibility (to ever-increase productivity, to achieve more) becomes an imperative—a "can" becomes a "must."

Not surprisingly, the (inevitable) inability to accomplish everything (and at the highest quality and the quickest pace) in a university setting leads to despondency, "self-reproach and auto-aggression", joylessness, and a thoroughly exhausted and eventually dehumanised student whose resulting struggles in her classes only compounds her anxiety. As theorists of work have pointed out, there is a paradox inhabiting the body of one who is overworked: s/he becomes *unable to rest* after being consumed by excessive activity for so long. Exhaustion is frequently characterised by sleeping disorders, and students who are deeply fatigued can not only lose the *ability* to rest, but also to focus, to enjoy life, and to foster and maintain connections with others.

At best, as Theodor Adorno argued, 'free time' becomes an escapist and superficial sort of 'winding down,' already structured by the forces from which we're trying to escape (e.g., consumerist, or scheduled, or staring at screens). And this 'free time' is merely recuperating us for the recommencement of work. As a result, our bodies are colonised and shaped to the point where we become incapable of "true leisure" which, for Adorno "represents that sweet 'oasis of unmediated life' in which people detach from economic demands and become genuinely free for the world and its culture".

> **"The origin of the word *school* is the Greek word *scholē*, which meant "leisure" or "learned conversation.""**

There is no better illustration of this phenomenon than Charlie Chaplin's character in the classic film *Modern Times*. As a factory worker employed to screw bolts onto parts on a conveyor belt, which was continually being sped up, Chaplin was ultimately wound through the gears of the factory, and he acquired a twitching, mechanised body that performed the same repetitive motions, even outside his work. Students, too, can forget their humanity and become alienated from their bodies, especially when their universities become more corporatised and factory-like.

Leisure and the Humane University

If one of the major obstacles for students is the 'never-say-no' ideology that is conducive to paralysing anxiety, burnout, and depression, then the university could play some role in being not only a refuge from those conditions, but also in being a proactive force for countering the instrumental way in which students and their educations are increasingly treated. If there is any value to being exhausted or broken, it is that we start seeing *what has been too much*. We often notice things for the first time when they break. And as more and more students are breaking under pressure, it is imperative to start attending to them and to the meaning of education. In fact, I contend that a serious look at the roots of schooling will mean a reclamation of our students' humanity; I am interested in helping to create a humane university.

The origin of the word *school* is quite instructive: we get our word from the Greek *scholē*, which meant "leisure" or "spare time" or "learned conversation," and eventually came to mean "a *place* for such leisurely discussion." What could we discover from thinking of school as *leisure*? I would like to suggest four major components of *scholē* that might also be core values of a humane university.

First, there is a **temporal and spatial dimension** to *scholē*. Leisure means 'spare time,' *and* a 'place for learned discussion' that is not colonised by the utilitarian or by the world of business. In fact, the ancient Greeks saw business as *a-scholia* or 'un-leisure.' We might recall Adorno's characterisation of leisure as the "oasis of unmediated life." *Scholē*, then, requires that we embrace the slow, the artisanal… that we linger, savour, and take our time. In a recent article on 'slow scholarship', a feminist geography collective argue:

"The relentless acceleration of work will continue until we say 'no' to wildly outsized expectations of productivity. Those of us in more senior positions have the responsibility to share these strategies with and support the slowness of our students and earlier career colleagues. We seek slowness not only for ourselves, but as an attempt to change the academic cultures of our discipline and work places".

Along similar lines, they argue we must make time for processes of thinking and writing 'differently', via strategies like unplugging and creating quiet spaces that allow minds to wander and creativity to flourish. How could we

consciously cultivate slowed tempos and physical spaces of contemplation on our campuses? Could it begin with pausing one more minute after asking our students a difficult question? What about a two-hour lunch break once a week? What about a digital-free room, with soft lighting, art supplies, books, and no clocks on the wall?

"We fail to see that we strip schooling of its potency as an adventure"

Second, *scholē* is intimately connected to **freedom and the liberal arts**. According to A. Bartlett Giamatti (who was a professor of English Renaissance literature, President of Yale University, and the 7th Commissioner of Major League Baseball), historically, "*artes liberalis* were to be pursued because in their pursuit the muscle that is the mind was disciplined and toughened and thereby made more free to pursue new knowledge". But he adds that the pursuit of the liberal arts was also meant to perpetuate "a condition of leisure," wherein the mind fulfils itself through an exercise of choices whose goal is to extend the freedom to exercise the mind. While the 'humanities' have been subsumed as one aspect of the 'liberal arts,' it is more

appropriate to say that *artes liberalis* are humanising. The humane university will foreground the study of liberal arts, not as a means to the end of better employment, but for their own sake. This brings us to the third component of *scholē*: it is an **autotelic activity**, that is, one in which the goal is the full exercise of itself, for its own sake, and one that is inherently **joyful and playful**. In autotelic activities, conditions are achieved that are *active* (not passive), *beautiful* (not merely useful), and "perfecting of our humanity, not merely exploitative of it", as Giamatti said. This means that *scholē* is about happiness. When students approach school instrumentally, it is often because they are being treated instrumentally—numbers in a classroom needed to justify this expansion of X program, or workers-in-training to contribute to the local economy. We have become so accustomed to 'making a case' for the economic usefulness of liberal arts that we fail to see that we strip schooling of its potency as an adventure with an undetermined end, an artistic exploration demanding experimentation and play, a joyful journey of discovery…and in the process of failing to remember all this, we also prepare students to be self-exploiting *animal laborans* who will chase ever-elusive performance benchmarks into their unfreedom. This is a cruel pedagogy.

Finally, *scholē* is **communal**. Giamatti describes: "Leisure as an ideal was a state of unforced harmony with others; it was, ideally, to live fully amidst activity, which activity has the characteristic of free time" . While Giamatti depicts American games that bring people together in leisure, like baseball, we can easily think of the activities of the university as necessitating community, with the common pleasures of being taken out of oneself through engagement with diverse perspectives. Harmony in *scholē* does not mean homogeneity, though; a harmony consists of *different* notes that can come together. Whereas in the context of sport, we might witness what seems to be a superhuman feat by a star athlete, in schooling-as-leisure, we might jointly encounter an idea, an image, a sound, or a passage that has a similar transcendent quality and effect. It is a moment in which "we are all free of all constraints of all

kinds," enriched by both the rituals of our shared community and by the ideals that are ennobling.

I think a humane university that is truly centred on student success (understood holistically) embodies all of these qualities, at the very least: It will make time and spaces for careful contemplation, play, and artistic endeavour; it will foreground the liberal arts as a praxis of freedom; it will frame and treat learning as processes that are beautiful and joyful in their own right, and students as whole persons with intrinsic value; and it will enhance social harmony, not through management or meaningless slogans, but through actively seeking and valuing diverse perspectives so that the messy work of transforming a crowd into a community can be democratic and self-directed.

Some Modest Examples and a Cautionary Note

I have attempted, in my own teaching, to foster student success through implementing what could be considered practices of scholē. To begin, I

recall from my own days of being a student that the antidote to leisure in learning is busywork: work that is assigned, seemingly to generate more "points" or to take up more

time. In some cases busywork manifests as a set of arbitrarily constructed obstacles through which a trained and docile student must pass (like a show horse) to get to the finish line.

That is, many hurdles have been historically created for students and assumed to be continuing assurances of quality; but too often, those tests suffer from inattention and lack of updating —they become (or always were) meaningless, irrelevant "hoops" to jump through. Wherever I can identify those hoops, I try to eliminate them, as they frequently cause a sense of drudgery for students, as well as for faculty and staff.

But meaningful challenges are a different thing altogether, and I think they can be a primary source of joy for students (and faculty). In various classes of mine, I have sought to bring the ideas of the philosophers/theorists to life by asking students to engage in experiments with me. In my Phenomenology classes, for example, after we read about how to shift visual perception to see phenomena in radically new ways, we visit our art museum on campus. There, we take in the latest exhibit, but we avoid looking at the title and description plates, so that what we perceive won't be skewed. We all write down our initial impressions, and then I ask my students to alter their perception by standing very close or very far away from the work, for example.

The point is to recognise how, given more time and by deliberately taking up different stances, a phenomenon can be read in multiple ways, challenging our initial knee-jerk interpretations. This exercise takes practice and is a disciplined, though play-full, mode of perception that can be translated to how we encounter the world at large. We talk

about how this openness can be helpful in listening to others, or in holding back pre-judgments, or in simply having more fulfilling aesthetic experiences.

I have also learned to slow down my classes, sometimes by teaching fewer books in a course and having fewer assignments, so that more time can be spent dwelling on and wrestling with core questions that arise. Also, in some classes, rather than quizzing or testing students, their assignment is to bring me a number of questions from the reading assignments over the semester. We talk about what good questions are, and we use their questions to structure class conversations. I learn not only more about what they comprehend in this way, but I also love the greater sense of collaboration and mutual investment in problems with the students. I believe these practices contribute to 'student success' by actively inculcating a kind of leisurely, though serious, attention to problems that matter, which is a nourishing, rather than depleting process.

So what if a university were to reclaim *scholē* as a way of becoming more humane to its students? It would require administrators, faculty, and staff to model a way of being and relating that is admittedly a break from the status quo of the

instrumentally-driven 'achievement society.' Detractors might then worry that students won't be ready for what meets them in the broader world, but the approach I've described wouldn't mean lack of preparation for what exists, but instead, preparation to critically and creatively investigate, so as to transform, what exists. To borrow a metaphor from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s description (in "Letter from a Birmingham Jail") of how the church should lead in relation to racial justice, the university should not be a 'thermometer' merely reflecting the patterns of broader society, but should be a 'thermostat' which sets the temperature and standards for a better environment. We teachers owe it to our students to enable them to be visionaries for the future, not just processors of the present.

> " **Fewer assignments mean that more time can be spent dwelling on and wrestling with the core questions that arise.** "

I will conclude with a word of caution: If we, individually or institutionally, pursue *scholē* as a praxis of liberation, we must

be careful to ensure that our cultivated leisure, openness, joy, and play do not come at the expense of another's humanity or well-being. A humane university must be centered on an inclusive politics that is attentive to the situations of those who are less protected, more vulnerable, and liable to exploitation. Feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed writes, "If the freeing up of time and energy depends on other people's labor, we are simply passing our exhaustion on to others".

If leisure in my life and in my classes means that my part-time, adjunct colleagues must take on more work, then I must seek a different instantiation of *scholē* that does not displace burdens, exacerbate disparities, or ask others to be more "resilient." We should also be wary of the exhaustion of the privileged, and be able to recognise when upset is due to the needed dismantling of unchecked and insensitive power. We need to educate ourselves and our students for this discernment between privilege as an energy-saving device (not having to think about certain things that affect others), and *scholē* as a reorientation of energy that generates a caring community founded on open, learned and critical dialogue.

Why Schools Must Give Up the Myth of Success

EDUCATION SHOULD SURRENDER ITS GRAND UTOPIAN PROJECTS AND INSTEAD TEACH US HOW TO SURVIVE.

Aislinn O'Donnell

Professor of Education at Maynooth University

Author of Anti-Heroic Education: For the Scavengers and the Gleaners

We need to inject a little more humility into education.

In a culture of 'stretch' and 'striving' where everyone has to be all they can be, this may seem sacrilegious, even if grand utopic visions have a tendency to leave things in a mess for the ordinary folks caught up in their wake.

Samuel Beckett worked hard to rid us of the remnants of delusions, illusions, utopias, salvation narratives or ideals that give false comfort to a human life. His works articulate an ethical position that, rather than taking refuge in speculation about how the world ought to be, help human beings to respond courageously to how things are – 'how it is'.

"If humanity learns to forgo personal ambition and think in terms of cooperation, compassion and companionship, it will be happier" – this is what publisher John Calder said is the message of Samuel Beckett's work.

"The experience of education is, for many, one of failure"

Whether or not Calder is correct in his analysis, it serves as an interesting provocation to those of us working and participating in systems of education. What effect does the principle of competition have on our experience of education? How do control mechanisms in society affect our relationships to failure? Facing 'how it is', a mess of a world for Samuel Beckett, and acting from that point might even provide some relief, perspective, and even humour. This is not a pessimistic position, and it doesn't mean that we can't also be attentive to, and delight in, tiny moments of mastery, camaraderie, joy, kindness and insight that occur in our educational experiments and studies.

Few spheres of life are as bathed in aspiration and 'life as it ought to be' as education. Yet the experience of education is, for many, one of failure. This is not the ordinary failure of the human condition but the kind of sadistic failure exemplified in the relationship between Pozzo and Lucky in Beckett's Waiting for Godot. It is impossible for all to attain external standards, embody the ideals evolved by others, attain goals prescribed universally, or even be 'average'.

Educational systems do not calculate the cost of the ethos of perfectionism, competition and comparison in the lives of those who fail to meet such standards, or who were never going to be in a position to do so in the first place. Whilst failure has been conceptualised more positively in recent times, this has tended to be in the context of building resilience with an eye to eventual success and flourishing. This focus on

the language of success makes it difficult to challenge the investment in the prestige and power that are equated with a successful life, even if this involves trampling on others or being insensible to their suffering. And it is precisely this moral failure that ought to be of most concern to us, in particular where educational practices are complicit in fostering competition, comparison, complacency, and unquestioning self-confidence. Wilful blindness to the fact that logically, by virtue of the nature of the system, not everyone can be 'winners', 'heroes', 'achievers' or even 'all they can be' persists in educational policy and practice. In his book Born Losers: A History of Failure in America, Scott Sandage maps the transformation of the language of failure in business from one of 'doing' to one of 'being', whereby failure became personalised and a marker of moral irresponsibility. So too in education, failure is seldom understood to be something one simply does but rather is incorporated into one's being as something one is, and this sense of being a failure can haunt the entirety of a life.

For some it will seem heretical to rail against the idols of progress, perfection and production that have come to mark social relations in contemporary liberal democratic capitalist societies. A brief glance at course descriptions, curricular principles, mission statements, or philosophies of educational institutions, reveal that perfectionist, progressive and aspirational discourses continue to define the way in which education understands humanity. At the same time, the emphasis on competence and measurable outcomes underscores that what matters is success measured against standards. Children see through this quite quickly once they enter school.

"Educational systems do not calculate the cost of the ethos of perfectionism, competition and comparison in the lives of those who fail to meet such standards"

What would happen if we conceived failure as an inevitable dimension of being human, to which our response might be to simply persist? Seeing things as they are rather than always hoping for a better world and imagining better human beings might help us to understand that rather than the construction of grand projects of social engineering, tempering ambition might mitigate the worst excesses of moral failure.

There is something difficult in all this refusal of utopianism and emphasis on 'clear-sighted' realism, in particular in relation to education. It is probably because we can feel ill at ease in addressing such issues as death, finitude, pain, catastrophe, meaninglessness, and suffering directly with young people and children. We may feel that they need not become prematurely aware of these experiences, especially if they have been fortunate enough to have led lives that have remained protected hitherto. Life also brings the small and temporary joys, laughter, pleasure, and epiphanies of mortal bodied existence, the logic goes, so why expose them needlessly? But to resist utopian logics can still involve creating educational atmospheres that invite minor

insights, little moments of happiness, surprise, the joys of persisting with something, some sense of achievement and progression, however small, that stems from engaging in doing something, no matter how undervalued others might find it. This is different from evaluating success by whether prescribed goals have been achieved, or by justifying curricula and methodologies through their instrumental value to external objectives. This rather anti-heroic and modest vision of education might better prepare children for inevitable disappointment and a sense of 'mess'.

It does not demand too much in terms of their development as ideal humans or even as citizens who will finally make the world a better place - an indecent request given the litany of failures humanity has so far committed. But it might support the development of a politics and ethics of decency, kindness, and camaraderie, and an ontological vision that begins with dependence, interdependence, dispossession, and vulnerability.

"So why not, reject the meta-narratives of progress and success?"

The contemporary Belgian-born, Mexico-based artist Francis Alÿs scrawls axioms such as 'Maximum effort Minimum result' in his notebooks. This seems to me an accurate description of the way many of us spend much of our lives, if we are to be honest.

So, why not acknowledge this, reject the meta-narratives of progress and success, and instead work with children and young people so that they open to encountering momentary joys, experience the camaraderie of their fellow beings that constitute the awkward human species, subvert those norms that are punishing, maintain a sense of the absurd, and seek out opportunities to be kind. In these ways we might help them to discover and invent those little passions and loves that will help them to live and to go on.

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An Instinctive Necessity

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Education is an evolutionary learning process that is a fundamental need for managing change, for personal development, for employment and for life-skills. Maslow's Hierarchy sets this out succinctly starting from human's basic needs in terms of food, water, culminating in self-fulfilment through achieving one's potential.

Reflective theorists may offer enlightenment to this debate, in particular that of Schon and Kinsella in her Journal Philosophy of Education. The ability to understand better ourselves, how we learn, how we can improve is fundamental to our success in where we have evolved today.

In this fast changing 21st century Britain, with low unemployment and critical shortages of employment skills, from engineering to ironically teaching; education is an essential requisite to adapt to this advancing era. More profoundly, social injustice is still the thorn in our side with current statistics on disadvantaged pupils indicating poor levels of progression into university re-enforcing the social and economic divide in the UK, as well as gender pay differentiations and low progression of females into STEM sector.

Schools are accountable, as they should be, and are governed, influenced and pressured by statistics and the need to compete in the emulous and political battle of independents, vs grammar, vs academies, vs state; not discounting the international education market dominated by Canada and China with the UK running up at 21st in the PISA league.

For the educators it is an opportunity to practice, develop and improve, to share knowledge, develop professional expertise, to inspire, to influence, to self-reflect resulting in improved actions and ultimately making a difference to the quality of life of other individuals. For the educated it offers hope, ambition, prosperity to gain material wealth and progression from a status quo. Relevant to all, whether you are a rehabilitating offender learning new skills to reform poor lifestyle choices, a student with learning needs re-defining themselves by overcoming their Achilles Heel, or a nonagenarian completing a degree for which we must salute Bertie Gladwin. From time immemorial the educators' impact on the educated of the future whether that be from the first invention of the wheel 3500BC, through to flight in 1903, and the cycle continues.

"People" are the main supposition to my argument to which I salute Tim Berners Lee and the global phenomena of his invention of the World Wide Web and the creation of a new type of industrial era, I think of Malala Yousafzai a brave advocate, in the face of terrorism and persecution, for the right to an education for all those born into this world irrespective, of gender, religion or class. I think of Rosie a dearly missed former student with a diagnosis of terminal cancer, and the sense of normality and routine that education gave to her.

Education is about improving human evolution and we all have a social and moral duty to adhere to this.

"It's not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, it's the one most adaptable to change" Charles Darwin

Critical Thinkers in the Post-Truth World

John Rodgers

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To discuss the purpose of education one must begin by defining terms. The corollary soon reached is that any such discussion is a necessarily broad church. Lacking the space here to toil in the wide-open fields of such a debate I have chosen to focus on a single, essential and urgent purpose: that education creates individuals who can think independently and critically.

We live in a post truth world; politicians lie, fake news abounds and "alternative facts" are presented without irony.

Some examples:
On May 28th President Trump tweeted; "Put pressure on the Democrats to end the horrible law that separates children from there (sic) parents once they cross the Border into the U.S." Soon thereafter Trump told Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen, "I know what you're going through right now with families is very tough, but those are the bad laws that the Democrats gave us. We have to break up families." However, no such law exists. There is no law that mandates the separation of children from their parents. It was Trump's own administration who devised the policy.

Online conspiracy group Q (aka QAnon) claimed in online posts that many senior Democrat officials have been arrested and jailed in spite of the fact that the same people are then seen walking around. They claim Kim Jong-un was placed into power by the CIA. In fact, the overwhelming majority of Q's online assertions are hilariously untrue.

"We live in a post truth world; politicians lie, fake news abounds and "alternative facts" are presented without irony"

Boris Johnson's battle bus was emblazoned with the memorable figure of £350 million a week bonus for the NHS from leaving the EU. Nigel Farage's poster showed a mass of immigrants marching towards our borders.

In India hysteria has been whipped up by message reposting and relaying via WhatsApp leading to the lynching and murdering of people falsely accused of crimes such as child lifting.

And who can forget the 'sexing up' of WMD documents?

How on Earth are young people to know what is real and what is not? What is true and what is false? How can they know the

difference between fake news and fact? How can they distinguish between Instagram pics that are advertisements and those that are not, or YouTube content providers who are paid to sell/say/promote and those who are genuine?

"The urgent, necessary priority of education right now is to teach students how to subject things to inquiry"

We all live in a chaotic, media saturated world in which the truth no longer seems to matter and is certainly harder to get to. But I say that the truth does matter. Those in authority must be held to account for the lies that they tell. If they are not the virus of post-truth politics (with symptoms like fake news, alternative facts, foreign cyber meddling etc) will be a contagion that cannot be stopped.

To counter this we must educate a generation of students who have the ability to think critically. We must give them the skills with which they can independently determine the truth of what they see, hear, read in the media.

In 'The Name of the Rose' Umberto Eco says through
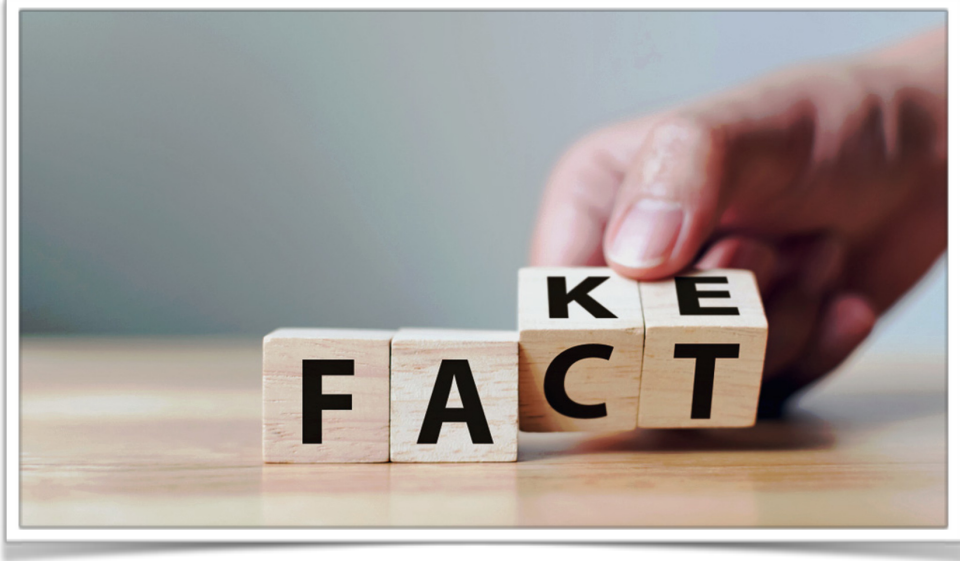
William of Baskerville that "books are not made to be believed, but to be subjected to inquiry. When we consider a book, we mustn't ask ourselves what it says but what it means."

The urgent, necessary priority of education right now is to teach students how to subject all things to inquiry, not to believe them naively, not to swallow things hook, line and sinker; but to analyse, test, subject to investigation, think critically about them. Imagine a polity unable to think critically in this manner. I don't think it is too absurd to reason that without this faculty, and with ever rampant fake news, democracy

will fail and society as we know it will fall.

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Knowledge is Power?

Amy Green

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Whilst preparing to answer the next question posed by The Conversation, I started by reflecting on the difference between the first question and this one; 'the most important thing', as opposed to 'the purpose.' My first thought was that the first question is much more open to subjectivity but the *purpose,* surely, could lead to fewer interpretations.

I believe that the purpose of education is to equip people to contribute to society, and to support the sustainability and also the progression of the planet. You could simplify this by saying that education, ultimately, is about human survival. The innate desire in us to gain information, or indeed, curiosity as a human characteristic, could be linked to a deeper animalistic instinct of self preservation. So, if we were to argue that education is all about survival, and investing in our existence on this planet, what should our priorities be and how should we be addressing the current system we are in?

In the last few centuries, the phrase '*knowledge is power*,' has become a cliche of sorts,

and not just in educational contexts. This archaic message is most commonly associated with the English Philosopher Sir Francis Bacon, and dates back to around 1597. Though it is difficult to argue with the sentiment that knowing more gives one more influence, and consequently 'power', I would challenge that knowledge is the only starting point needed to succeed. And thankfully, this has already been challenged by many educational theorists and academics in recent years.

Wendy Berliner and Deborah Eyre said that, '*we don't know what tomorrow looks like so it's learning skills that matters so we can cope with whatever life throws at us.*' (The Education Revolution, Great Minds and How to Grow Them) This is a point raised in 2018 as part of the High Performance Learning programme, in a book written to parents to help the minds of their children lead to success in school, but also in life. It comes back to the message in my previous response for The Conversation, that the most important idea in education is to prepare our young people for the future, and that of future literacy.

But, is the purpose of education being recognised as an important issue, possibly the most important, by the people that can make the most change?

'*There is also a deep resistance by politicians to questioning the fundamental purpose of education; they prefer to talk as if school improvement were merely technical matter, rather than an indelibly moral one,*' Guy Claxton, Bringing Schools to Life, Education Forwards.

The purpose of education is not a black and white, right or wrong issue. As Guy Claxton says, it is most certainly a moral one. I felt this question could lead to fewer interpretations, and surely it is an obvious interpretation to say that the purpose of education is to ultimately sustain the planet. The more difficult part is that we need government policy to recognise the issues that need to be addressed through teaching and learning and our curriculum in order to make this happen. At the moment our education system seems to be driven by recall of information to get through examinations,

leading to schools being measured by league tables.

One step in the right direction, has been the recent changes in the Ofsted focus. In an article published by BBC online in September of 2018, The Chief Inspector of Ofsted, Amanda Spielman was quoted saying, '*how we have created a situation where second-guessing the test can trump the pursuit of real,* *deep knowledge and understanding*'. She went on to say that, '*Too many teachers and leaders have not been trained to think deeply about what they want their pupils to learn and how they are going to teach it.*' I think we need to take a long, hard look at what we really want our students to learn, before we can comment on whether teachers are trained appropriately and then their pedagogical practice.

To conclude by revisiting Sir Francis Bacon and '*knowledge is power,*' perhaps we could now argue that '*education is power.*' We have the power, through our education system, to make change happen. As leaders, teachers, politicians, parents, whatever the role may be; if we can achieve a united vision for the future about the purpose of education, the impact could be massive.

The Conversation Manifesto
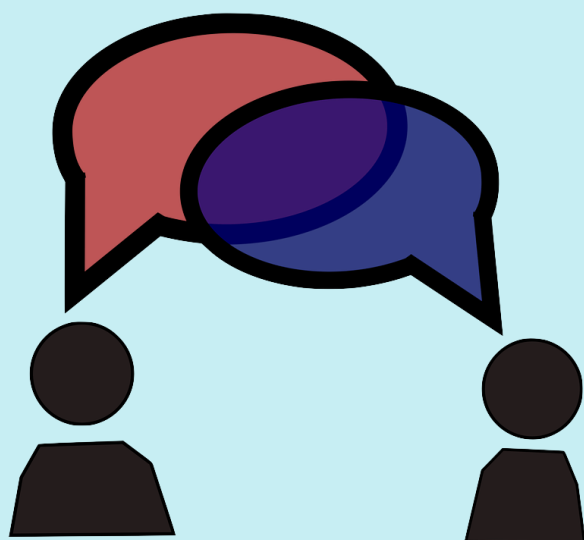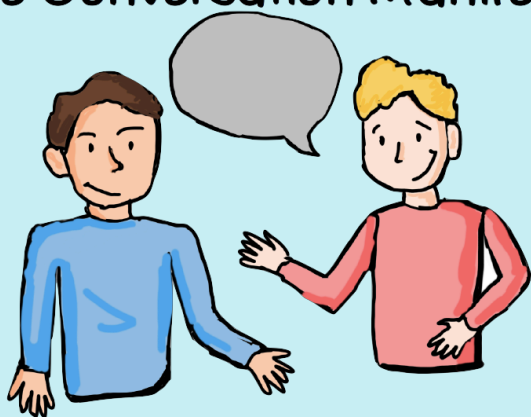
The Conversation has the following aims:

☐ To encourage more conversations between education professionals

☐ To increase incidents of serendipitous knowledge exchange

☐ To provide stimuli for conversations through the magazine

☐ To provide content that challenges, inspires and provokes

☐ To be a vehicle to carry content created by education professionals

☐ To provide a forum for conversation through the website & social media

The aim of this magazine is to stimulate conversation. Whether you agree on not with the ideas of our contributors please discuss them with colleagues. Be challenged, be inspired, *have a conversation*.