



# On Our Belief in Education

JASON EYRE 

PRACTICE-BASED PAPER



## ABSTRACT

Short polemical piece highlighting the role of the university as the space for intergenerational exchange through participation in learning communities.

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*So strong is the belief in education, in what is most fragile in education – real education, I mean – that in the end this belief is lost.*

I am paraphrasing the opening lines of André Breton's first *Manifesto of Surrealism* from 1924 (Breton 1924/1972, p.3). Breton spoke of *life* rather than *education*, but what is education if not a manifestation of life? The equation of the two becomes clearer when we consider Breton's admonition that by *clinging too hard* to what we believe in, we end up losing it.

As students, teachers, researchers, as the educators and the educated, we are perhaps inclined to *believe in* education as a given, as a pursuit that is self-evidently worthwhile. As recent events have shown us, a child's education is deemed vitally important, and the value of knowledge, higher learning, science is perhaps more clear to us now than it has been for years, crucial to our very material survival. Nearly a hundred years on from Breton, we can see plainly in the pronouncements of our governments and our fellow subjects that education is widely viewed as essential, critical, key. Hence our belief in education is *so strong*.

Our belief is strong, but education – *real education* – is fragile.

What is most fragile in education? Breton's formulation suggests that what we believe in most strongly is what we see to be most fragile. What is most precious is seen to be most vulnerable. Hence, what we take to be of *real* value in education is that which we see as most under threat.

But which real? Whose reality? There are those that say *real* education is fragile in the face of woke progressivism, grade inflation, Mickey Mouse degrees; in the face of neoliberalism, conservatism, consumerism, precariousness; against Marxism, Brownism, Goveism. Fragile in the face of culture, economy, disease, our environment, our trembling systems of exchange. Education is fragile, then, *according to our own belief*, and those who share those beliefs. A crisis in our own image. In defence of our own educational reality, we reach for our righteous rifles and take aim, clinging hard to our weapons and the fragile rosary strands of our belief, defenders of the real against the unreal, the genuine against the ersatz, reason against unreason, generation against generation. We feel riven, isolated, divided. Whose side are we on? The war drags on. Indeed, it cannot be won.

Our beliefs turn to sand in our hands. Why fight anymore? Why even try? We are powerless. We are perhaps tempted instead to embrace a certain nihilism, cynicism, a withdrawal from the fray: '*There is a war between the ones who say there is a war and the ones who say that there isn't*' said Leonard Cohen in 1974.

*So strong is the belief...that in the end the belief is lost.*

John Dewey saw education as the means by which a community or society renews itself through the educational growth of its immature members (Dewey 1916/2011). This idea of education was echoed a century later by Bernard Stiegler, who saw the very project of the Enlightenment itself as an individual and collective responsibility, achieved by enabling those with the potential for reason to leave their state of minority and attain their majority so that they are capable of thinking and acting reasonably, both as individuals *and* as part of their society (Stiegler, 2015). Stiegler saw this as an intergenerational exchange, whereby academics have a particular responsibility as 'officers of maturity'.

Perhaps that characterisation of higher education seems paternalistic and overbearing? And isn't there too a kind of fear in us, we 'officers of maturity', that in reality we have nothing to offer the younger generation? That we have already failed them? In our desecration of the planet, in our moribund, ineffective political institutions, in the starkly inequitable economic sphere in which the greatest effort seems to be expended in pulling up ladders and exhorting our children to *climb better*. And furthermore, we *really do not understand* the swirling technologies in which our younger generations swim, that our own experiences are now worthless and obsolete. Ours was a world of wires, and we are still tangled in them. We do not understand the unmoored wireless world that consumes us, and we have no experiences of our own pandemics to share. We find ourselves between the Scylla of a crisis so much bigger than we are and the Charybdis of own individual ineffectiveness. We have always already failed. We have nothing left of value to give. Our belief is lost. Nihilism, cynicism, withdrawal.

Hannah Arendt shows us that what drives us is not the futile clinging to our beliefs of what properly constitutes education, nor the disavowal of those broken beliefs as they run like powder through our fingers, but love:

*“Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable”*  
(Arendt, 1954).

The world was already ruined when we found it. It was always only ever a ruin, but there is beauty to be found in ruins, and life. We bear a responsibility for the world as it is, even if it was not us that ruined it. There has been a succession of ruinous thought, and beatific thought as well, a long line of thought and action, good and ill, of which our own are just a part, a fleeting link between memory and anticipation.

As Blanchot (1983/1988) says: “What I am thinking I have not thought all alone”.

And we are not alone.

All of us in the university, whatever our status or station in life, whatever our age or experience, no matter our perspective on what constitutes the ‘real’ in education, the fragile, we all share the experience of this, our learning community. And it *is* ours, it is all of ours. Our learning community is not without conflict, tension or friction, and nor should it be. That which is riven and contested is at least *alive*. Policy makers, journalists and scholars of higher education have put forward myriad ways in which we can potentially conceive of the university – its purpose, what it is for. I hold with the likes of Ron Barnett that whatever view you take, whatever you take to be ‘real’ or fragile in education, the university is inherently about our individual and collective *becoming*, as people and as a society Barnett (2011).

It remains for us to see what we will become, and it falls to us to participate in that becoming. We cannot resile from participation or help but participate. Our fates are unfolding, as yet undetermined, the dice are still in the air, and the paths we will follow are necessarily divergent. But all of us here in *this university, now*, pass through the same threshold into the world, and it is that common experience which brings us together and unites us in circumstance, however briefly; the gateway through which we pass and for which these papers will be written.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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