

STORIES OF HOPE

REIMAGINING EDUCATION

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Creative curriculum design: Introduction

*Tom Burns, Sandra Sinfield, and
Sandra Abegglen*

This section focuses on pedagogy and curriculum development in a challenging, twenty-first-century Higher Education context that values competition, efficiency, and the market. These works highlight the value and purpose of education and especially the risk worth taking in education to change current approaches. As Gert Biesta (2013) states, “real” education always involves a “risk” because education is not about filling a bucket but lighting a fire. In this “brave”, re-imagined education, students are not seen as objects, educators are not seen as knowledge holders, and the curriculum is not seen as something to pass through and tick off. Rather, pedagogy is framed as valuable practice, a means to promote teaching and learning that matters.

The chapters included in this section do not provide manuals on how to do things (although they do include very practical advice on how to implement change), but inspirational “lived” and “lively” accounts on how to instil hope, how to surface hope—and how to be and become hopeful in your educational practices. The effect is energising, recognising agency and yourself as an actor with agency, in diverse contexts. It is about reclaiming ownership, finding voice, celebrating students and their becoming—and it is about hope.

Thus, this section is more than a section about the curriculum: it is real and imagined hope beyond the normalised monetised and transactional discourse that is the narrative of education in these dark, “supercomplex” (Abegglen et al., 2020), and neo-liberal times. In these chapters people

dare to imagine and be different. They illuminate what makes education educational, that is, the value in maintaining the complexity and risks involved in a hopeful education. As Biesta (2009, p. 35) puts it:

Instead of simply making a case for effective education, we always need to ask “effective for what?”—and given that what might be effective for one particular situation or one group of students but not necessarily in another situation or for other groups of students, we also always need to ask “effective for whom?”

The section opens with a chapter, “Hope Street: Reimagining learning journeys” by Laura Bissell and David Overend, that meanders with the authors along “Hope Street” in Glasgow and Mexico, re-discovering the joy of small things, valorising the everyday, and reimagining education as a journey or journeys of hope. This is provocatively followed by a chapter, “The other F word: Re-storying student failure in Canadian Higher Education” by Victoria A. Fritz, that celebrates and embraces failure to help students embrace risk. In a similar vein, “Armed love’: A case study in cultivating a pedagogy of hope”, by Christopher J. Cachia, reveals the power of sharing personal accounts of anxiety and loss. Continuing the focus on empathy, the next chapter, “The XXX Game: A character-based tool for learning” by Louise Sheridan, reveals the power of role-playing games where students become empowered to enter the risky space of idea exploration in theatrical ways. We move on to “Reimagining the sage–guide dichotomy: A life-long learner’s story of teaching and learning in Higher Education”, where Katherine Herbert and Yeslam Al-Saggaf explore the sage-on-the-stage/guide-on-the-side conundrum provoked by the author’s metaphor of the player-conductor. Here the tutor creates a model assignment and invites the students to critique and develop it, and in the process, to find their own strength and agency. “Playing with learning: Adopting a playful approach to Higher Education learning and teaching” offers an auto-ethnographic account of moving from a didactic mode of teaching that was “boring” for students—and more so for the lecturer himself—to a more joyous and playful approach. As a novice “pracademic”, John Parkin recovers his agency as a primary teacher turned university lecturer when he embraces traditional “toys” for learning. In the next chapter, “Making plants cool again: Re-introducing botany as a beacon of hope and innovation in our educational systems”, Geyan Surendran, James Connorton, Adam

Bromley, Lian X. Liu, Paul Townsend, Michael Heinrich, and Shelini Surendran offer a passionate plea for the re-centring of Botany in Biology and Science courses to re-highlight the value that such education can bring to all of us. “Putting theory into (proposed) action: The significance of campaign planning as an assessment task” by Luke Ray Di Marco Campbell offers a model of authentic assessment where students are invited to put together campaign proposals that harness their lived and professional experiences in an effort to change their worlds and those of others. “Freedom to learn: Developing autonomous critical learners through self-assessment in Higher Education” by Agnese Di Domenico, Aidan Harvey, Beth Karp, Elizabeth Veldon, Ingeborg van Knippenberg, John Cowan, and Zack Moir offers a passionate argument for autonomy, meta-cognition and self-assessment as a way to reclaim and re-humanise education—which leads beautifully into the concluding chapter, where, in “Hope in an art school”, Simone Maier weaves a fascinating flaneur’s journey through her recent experiences as a university art lecturer, frustrated by the greyness of Higher Education and constant rejection, exhilarated by her postgraduate studies, and finding her joy and voice working with her students.

Key learnings

1. Hope as a critical pedagogical praxis

Hope here is not a naïve optimism or an abstract ideal. It is positioned as a grounded, intentional, and relational practice—one that is enacted through curriculum design, storytelling, risk-taking, and creative engagement. Whether it is in re-enchanting the everyday, confronting institutional norms, or engaging students in world-making acts, hope becomes a strategy of resistance and renewal.

2. Reclaiming agency and voice

Across the section, there is a powerful call to restore voice and agency to both educators and students. The chapters challenge transactional models of education by demonstrating how co-creation, dialogue, and trust can shape more meaningful pedagogical encounters. In doing

so, they foreground practices that empower learners and educators to speak, act, and transform their educational realities.

3. Embracing risk, failure, and uncertainty

Risk is reframed not as something to be avoided but as a condition of real learning. The contributors illustrate how stepping into vulnerability—by sharing personal narratives, experimenting with unfamiliar methods, or reframing failure as learning—opens up possibilities for connection, insight, and growth. These acts of courage become central to rehumanising education.

4. Reimagining roles and relationships

Traditional binaries—such as expert/novice, teacher/student, sage/guide—are disrupted. New relational dynamics emerge through metaphors like player-conductor, and through practices of collaboration and co-learning. These relational reconfigurations shift authority from control to care, and from instruction to invitation, cultivating spaces of mutual transformation.

5. Pedagogical embodiment and creativity

The chapters bring attention to embodied, affective, and sensory forms of knowing. Through performance, play, poetry, plant life, and art, pedagogical practices are reconnected with joy, emotion, and imagination. These creative modalities are not tangential but integral to resisting reductive educational paradigms and revitalising the curriculum.

6. Disruption as a space for possibility

Rather than viewing disruption—whether biographical, institutional, or systemic—as purely negative, these chapters show how it can be a starting point for critical reflection and pedagogical innovation. Moments of fracture are repurposed into openings for dialogue, community, and new futures.

In their totality, these chapters offer a powerful rejoinder to neoliberal education. They show that curriculum is not merely a sequence of content to be delivered, but a site of struggle, care, and possibility. This is curriculum as becoming, as connection, as critique—and above all, as hope enacted.

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