Listening, Thinking, and Acting Together
The Pedagogy Group
Published online: 07 Jul 2014.

To cite this article: The Pedagogy Group (2014) Listening, Thinking, and Acting Together, Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society, 26:3, 414-426, DOI: 10.1080/08935696.2014.917847
To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2014.917847

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly
The Pedagogy Group emerged from a network of artists, curators, writers, and activists who are teaching courses that incorporate elements of social engagement in the context of arts and media programs. Members share and collectivize information and materials acquired through their individual research and practices such as syllabi, classroom exercises, and readings. Over time we have become a peer support network. Such cooperative efforts to develop and use a shared body of knowledge are understood as a first step toward countering some of the current limitations of art pedagogy, often hampered by competition and restricted by its focus on individual achievement. Part of our process is to look closely at conventional art training, as well as how socially engaged pedagogy is situated within the “new university,” in order to consider what models, subjectivities, and values are being produced by this work.

Key Words: Art, Collectivity, Commons, Community Engagement, Pedagogy
Listening, Thinking and Acting Together
The Pedagogy Group*

* Text written by:
  James Andrews, Maureen Connor, Susan Jahoda, Laurel Ptak, Robert Sember and Caroline Woolard

Images provided by:
Scott Berzofsky, Laurel Ptak, Shane Azlan Selzer and Sasha Sumner
The Pedagogy Group emerged from a network of artists, curators, writers and activists who are teaching courses that incorporate elements of social engagement in the context of arts and media programs. Existing descriptions of social practice seem to agree on a few basic elements: it reaches beyond the traditional spaces of the studio or the gallery directly into the public arena and everyday life. It incorporates artistic strategies as diverse as urban interventions, utopian structures, guerrilla architecture, green sustainable projects, street performance, and community-based practices. While Social Practice art is informed by the early 20th century avant gardes such as Dadaism and Futurism, social sculpture, situationism, happenings, public art, institutional critique, and political activism, the emergence of social practice degree programs, articles and books, festivals, symposia, and funding organizations, suggests that a transformation of the field is underway. The Pedagogy Group formed within and in relation to this transformation as a space of reflection and debate.

![Members of The Pedagogy Group threewing at a weekly meeting, June, 2013](image.png)

The Pedagogy Group’s participants come from a range of private and public colleges and universities; some hold full-time tenured positions while others are part-time, adjuncts. All share an interest in reshaping the fine arts curriculum with a focus on how social engagement is learned and taught.

Since the group’s first meeting in December 2012, members have shared and collectivized information and materials acquired through their individual research and practices such as syllabi, classroom exercises and readings. Our weekly gatherings, which occur at the homes and studios of members, involve loosely structured conversations, ranging from debates about the social, economic and political conditions within our schools, and the sharing of teaching strategies and techniques, to stories from our classrooms. We occasionally welcome visiting artists, writers and art producers to our meetings and every few months we host an expanded conversation with a wider group of artists, teachers, and writers. Sub-groups occasionally form to collaborate on critical texts, conferences, exhibitions and panels.
Over time we have become a peer support network. Such cooperative efforts to develop and use a shared body of knowledge are understood as a first step toward countering some of the current limitations of art pedagogy, often hampered by competition and restricted by its focus on individual achievement. Part of our process is to look closely at conventional art training, as well as how socially engaged pedagogy is situated within the “new university,” to consider what models, subjectivities, and values are being produced by this work.

The Pedagogy Group organized Art and Radical Pedagogy, a workshop at WHAT DO WE DO NOW, an Arts and Labor Alternatives Fair at Eyebeam, New York, October 18 2013

Many of us were educated according to the traditional modernist values-artistic autonomy and especially self-expression, which (we were taught) was only possible through continuously developing and nurturing our ‘unique’ individualities. The rewards of these efforts were existential in that they are seen as key to an authentic and fulfilling life. The rewards are also financial since within capitalist systems, individuality, autonomy and choice are bound to and affirm private property, consumption and wealth accumulation. An artist who distinguishes herself from others in style and expression is ready for circulation in the art economy. Status within academic institutions and the acknowledgment of the artwork facilitate this circulation thereby implicating pedagogy within the base economy of the society as a whole.

But what is actually meant by the terms self-expression and individuality, and how do they relate to art practice? According to one standard dictionary definition, self-expression is the manifestation of one’s personality, feelings, or ideas, the assertion of one’s individual traits, as in art or music, in other words one’s individuality.[1] The individual, in turn, is defined as a person separate from others, possessing his or her own needs or goals. This definition of individuality, which connects to a legal concept—that an individual is a ‘natural person’ (as opposed to a corporation)—has been fairly stable since John Locke’s notion of the tabula rasa helped introduce the idea of liberty and individual rights in the seventeenth century.
Many artists have been critical of the centrality of individual self-expression in art. Yet, even when critical theory and later post-structuralism entered art criticism and eventually art pedagogy offering some conceptual tools with which to further question these closely-held values, the championing of individual expression continued to find support for some time through the concept of art's autonomy, as promoted in the writings of Theodor Adorno, Clement Greenberg and others.

If such values remain central to our needs and desires as artists despite much critique, individual self-expression and autonomy have been the order of the day for quite a while, in contemporary society as a whole. While questions about and definitions of what constitutes individuality have been central to philosophy for centuries, sociologist Isabelle Loret's concept of what she terms governmental self-government seems to speak directly to the social conditions of our culture's relation with 'ourselves'.[2]

Loret examines the long accepted idea that we have an inner nature, an inner essence that ultimately makes up our unique individuality which is usually understood as unalterable, merely able to be suppressed or liberated. Nourished by the notion of such 'inner truths', we believe we are able to design ourselves and our lives freely, autonomously, and according to our own decisions. According to Loret power relations between ourselves and others are therefore not easy to perceive as we assume that our actions are based on free choice.[3] Thus governmental self-government takes place in an apparent paradox--governing, controlling, disciplining, and regulating one's self means at the same time empowering one's self, which, in this sense, means to be free. Only through this paradox can sovereign subjects be governed. Precisely because techniques of governing one's self arise from the simultaneity of subjugation and empowerment, the simultaneity of compulsion and freedom, in this paradoxical movement, the individual not only becomes a subject, but a certain, modern 'free' subject--a subject who continually participates in (re)producing the conditions for governmentality.[4]

While we can't hope to confront such deeply held values head on, we consider how we might design our social practice pedagogy in a way that imagines and prepares the ground for alternative, less oppressive and more equitable futures? While existing program descriptions in art schools and universities agree on basic elements-- that social practice moves outside the studio and into both the public arena and everyday life and that it incorporates alternative artistic strategies -- it fails to incorporate three key components--social exchange, deep systemic or background analysis, and models of sustainability. This deficit not only reduces the potential for socially rooted pedagogy to address its own conditions as an emerging discipline it can also be seen as yet another example of the die-hard notion of art as inherently private and individualized despite the clear intention of the field to produce another kind of experience. While this would be reason enough to engage in an analysis of the social exchanges that take place within and beyond the formal art context and within the university under the rubric of social practice, such an investigation also seems essential to our group process. Just as we must horizontally share our individual ideas and research, we must be fully aware of the interpersonal and political dynamics of social practice projects.
As a result of our discussions and exchanges we have begun to view pedagogy itself as a form of social practice. We now think of our classes as well as group meetings as sites of living and becoming. Gigi Roggero, in his essay ‘Five Theses on The Common’ writes:

Using Deleuze’s terms, we must distinguish between a school of thought and a movement of thought. The former is set of categories that are produced and defended in order to patrol the borders of an academic, disciplinary, and/or theoretical field: it is the way in which the global university works today to depoliticize thought and reduce living knowledge to abstract knowledge (edu-factory collective, 2009). In contrast a movement of thought aims to use categories as tools to interpret reality and to act within and against the political economy of knowledge. [5]

We must therefore acknowledge the complex contradictions we embody in our roles as waged workers in newly established social practice programs, most of which are developing inside existing MFA programs. This situation is especially problematic as the MFA has become a requirement for both art market legitimation as well as adjunct and tenure track teaching jobs, and yet has left many artists with an impossible burden of debt amidst steadily decreasing earning opportunities. These contradictions mirror the difficulties we as socially focused educators find ourselves in as we straddle both sides of the status quo, simultaneously challenging and legitimizing institutions that are
frequently complicit—through the commercialization of knowledge, outsized tuitions, and the manufacture of student debt—with one of the greatest upward transfers of wealth ever recorded in human history. [6] These fault-lines, centered around the ongoing negotiation of social class, power, privilege and esteem in the classroom, and the blind spots they create, challenge us to seek out new strategies in our teaching which honor both the necessity of collective identity and dissent, and the need for personal security and survival, in an increasingly precarious and unstable world.

Looking beyond the classroom, we are also considering the wider contexts of our teaching. If social engagement programs seek to reach beyond the isolation of the artist’s studio, towards more creative, more ethical, and more collectively orchestrated modes of expression, these initiatives are unfolding in relation to an education system in crisis. For example, surrounding, or adjacent to school campuses, local neighborhoods struggle to co-exist with universities, for better and worse, often finding themselves subject to university expansions, development projects and school culture. [7]

Incorporating courses/contexts into social practice curricula that address the creation of economies centered on ethical considerations, seems central to re-thinking social practice pedagogy. How artists envision their economic lives as interconnected with the lives of others is important to being able to shape a future that ensures more equitable community economies. Rather than hierarchically replacing one system with another, we are relying instead on practices that foster the reframing of problems, dialogue, and experimentation. While there are no immediate answers to these dilemmas, fundamental to our definition of social practice is the process of reading, thinking, and acting together. To this end, collective and working class histories that exist within students own backgrounds are given expression as is the honoring of intelligences that fall outside of academia.
Pursuing these concepts, we enter our classrooms with the following lines of inquiry:

**Classroom as Object of Investigation**
- How do we rethink the space of learning?
- Why are we here?
- What do we care about?
- What is urgent?
- How do we teach and learn with a politics of hope and possibility?
- How do we live together?
- What are ethical social practices?
- How and in what ways does social engagement already live in the world?

**University as Object of Investigation**
- How do the social, political, and spatial contexts of the new university alter our own and our students’ perceptions of the world?
- Can transformative curricula be created without examining the nature of the education crisis as a whole?
- How can we structure our classrooms to address the exclusion of students and communities from our schools?
- Through which forms of analysis and data can we assess our own performance?
- How does the emergence of social practice courses or concentrations within an art school alter the character of other courses, or even the department as a whole?

**What Do Alternatives Look Like?**
- Can we come to an understanding that there is no such thing as a homogeneous "general public" independent of the needs and investments of the multiple constituencies that make up a pluralistic society?
- Can we define the terms of success?
- How could worker-owned businesses create a sustainable living for artists?
- Would you work without recognition for the rest of your life?
- How can we as artists free our practices from both market and institutional "returnability" without withdrawing from the public sphere?
- What is the relation between the institution and the work we make?

**What Practices Can We Commit To?**
- Understanding that presence is pedagogy. Being present and paying attention to what we have at this moment.
- Understanding that teaching is learning and learning is teaching.
- Being responsible and prepared to listen and observe.
- Being responsible for accommodating dissent if someone in the group disagrees—this doesn’t mean they are not a part of the group.
- Being open to expanding and evaluating the spaces of learning.
In our efforts to develop alternatives, we have found the following exercises helpful:

**Asset-Mapping Exercise [8]**

How do we operate from a place of abundance rather than scarcity? Can we utilize the skills, strengths, and resources that already exist in our communities to bolster and support each other’s work? Could this process of exchange lead to a more vibrant cultural ecology, the realization of each other’s intrinsic and expansive value, and strategies that result in everyone ending up with more than they started with?

Classrooms often ignore the existing interests, desires, and needs of students and teachers. What if classes started by identifying what each member has to share? Rather than assuming that we want to work individually, this activity supports a group culture of mutual support by asking participants to identify resources to share.

**Preparation:**
Organize the space so that there’s a circle of chairs with one seat less than there are people in the room.

**Facilitation:**
Explain that this is a movement activity, so if someone has no desire/ability to move a lot, they can be the note taker. Everyone sits in a chair, and the “extra” person without a chair (the facilitator, to start) stands in the center of the circle. The person in the center calls out a skill that s/he has, or something s/he has access to (e.g., a boat, sewing skills, listening to people, cooking). Those who have that thing as well get up out of their seats and find new seats to sit in. Whoever doesn’t find a seat (since there’s one less seat than persons) will be in the center and will be next to announce a skill they HAVE to the group. If the center person gets scared, suggest they say something simple (such as, “I know how to eat ice cream”).

The note-taker doesn’t get up at all; s/he is responsible for tallying the things we HAVE (i.e., how many people get up and move seats per HAVE).

This continues for 15-30 minutes, as long as the activity is generating energy.

**DISCUSS** the HAVEs the group just found out about. Look at the list the note taker made.

**OPTIONAL:**
Turn to the person on your left (or someone you don’t know) and say which HAVE is most valuable to you. Why? Discuss.

**OPTIONAL:**
Break into groups of three to five persons and come up with a way to continue circulating information about the HAVEs and NEEDs in the room, using Post-Its, a shared spreadsheet, a Facebook group, a notice board, open office or mutual aid hours, OurGoods, [9] and so on. Then present these ideas to the group and identify people who will move forward by implementing/experimenting with one to two sharing systems.
Evan Janes, Chris Locke and Aisha Sambo discussing Asset Mapping, Amherst Community Engagement Studio, facilitated by Susan Jahoda and Joseph Krupczynski, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, February 2014

Asset Mapping Activity, Social Practice Studio, facilitated by Scott Berzofsky at the Maryland Institute College of Art, Fall 2013. Notes by Khadija Adell
Threeing Exercise

The practice of threeing has been utilized at our weekly meetings as a method for slowing down group processes, making visible the mechanics of power relationships, solving problems, cultivating empathy and horizontality, and most important, building trust.

One of the members of the group has introduced threeing as a method for reviewing projects in all of her studio art classes. She reports that it is a dynamic experience that modulates the environment of “critique” by transforming the environment of competition into an environment that is generous, engaged, and dialogical. Authority and expertise are replaced by supportive and collaborative practices.

Paul Ryan, *Figure 1.3 Three Roles in the Relational Circuit*, in The Three Person Solution, Chapter 1, page 13, 2009

Workshop on Threeing at Rethinking Marxism 2013: Surplus, Solidarity, Sufficiency

Members of The Pedagogy Group offered a three-hour workshop titled "...in which three or more people create sustainable, collaborative relationships, using the ideas of Paul Ryan’s threeing.[10]" Developed in the 1970s, threeing was inspired by Ryan’s work with Marshall McLuhan, as well as the ideas of Charles Peirce and Gregory Bateson. Originally developed as a “social practice” for engaging with workers and educators using cybernetic theory as a model for understanding human patterns of behavior, threeing self-consciously acts to reorganize the differences among individuals, which in turn promotes collaboration and the replacement of hierarchical with heterarchic relationships and also supports healthier relationships to our ecosystems. Rotating through the roles of firstness (a free, spontaneous initiator), secondness (reacting without analysis to firstness), and thirdness (mediating between the two previous positions), subjects become aware of how they interact and construct meaning and how these meanings change and can be negotiated. The embodiment of these roles is part of a
circuit where the concerns and ideas presented by one individual have an impact on the responses and behavior of the other two. All participants can then recognize that the three subject positions are contingent and relational. Each position experiences its own reality while simultaneously observing the positions of others. Altering social relationships—beginning with three and extending to larger groups—holds significant possibilities for rethinking class relations, stabilizing social relationships, developing and managing group dynamics, and creating sustainable and collaborative relationships.

Setup:
- Create a circle with the chairs.
- Inside the circle, create three boxes on the floor, each with a different color tape (red, yellow, and blue).
- Mark each box with its number: firstness, secondness, and thirdness.
- Gather other necessary materials: whiteboard, markers (red, yellow, and blue), and a handout with a description of threeing.

Procedure:
Welcome everyone. Workshop leaders introduce themselves and describe the formation and work of The Pedagogy Group. Then go through the following steps.

1. Define threeing and explain the threeing handout with a set of projected visuals.

2. Explain why threeing is helpful and useful. Focus on how it is a technique to foster solidarity.

3. Ask workshop participants to introduce themselves by giving their names and, if they like, where they are from. Then ask them to mention one collective or collaborative experience they've had. For example, they may have belonged to an actual collective or to a group, community, or organization. Prompt them if they can't find an example. Also, ask them if they can name one thing about their experience that worked and one thing that didn't. Write each participant's information on a whiteboard.

4. Choose a topic for a demonstration of threeing and model it. Three people will need to assume their positions in firstness, secondness, and thirdness, though without initially stepping into the boxes.

5. Help guide people to determine which position they are occupying once they are threeing.

6. Choose a time and topic keeper. This person will ask for new volunteers to step into the circle and to choose a new topic. This topic can come from one of the examples on the whiteboard. She asks the three initial volunteers to step out of their positions.

7. Repeat the above several times until at least six people have participated.

8. Lead group discussion. Ask other participants what they observed and if there was anything in these conversations that didn't get resolved.
Endnotes

3. Lorey, Governmentality and Self-precarization.
4. Lorey, Governmentality and Self-precarization.
5. Gigi Roggero, Five Theses on the Common, Rethinking Marxism 22 no. 3 (2010): 358.
7. Architect Vishaan Chakrabarti has stressed how public squares, such as those created by Occupy encampments and those found on university campuses, allow for “the expression of instability ... spaces like Tompkins Square, Tiananmen Square and Tahrir Square have been stages for history because they provide the loci for urban gathering, particularly for a city’s youth ... without cities and the spaces they inspire, nations themselves would never change” (see http://urbanomnibus.net/2011/02/liberation-squares). Likewise, radical pedagogy, art, and public space form the basis for Free Universities—pop-up temporary free schools organized in public space and through which anyone can teach or attend a class. “Free U’s,” as they are known, have been produced autonomously and have also been embedded within activist convergences (S17, the OWS anniversary, Student Power Convergences), protests (OWS, May Day 2012), and days of action at numerous New York City universities, including City College (CUNY), the Graduate Center (CUNY), and the Cooper Union. Free Universities are organized according to the principles of strategic direct action and are inspired in part by a series of one-day public occupations called Occupy Town Squares that sprang up in early 2012, as well as by the philosophy and practice of direct democracy.