

Living and learning in a pandemic: Creating the conditions for response-ability to flourish

Authored By: Kathleen Kummen & Randa Khattar

Category: Blog / Reflection

Tags: discourse, educator, neoliberalism, pedagogy, post-secondary education, subjectivity

url: <https://www.ecpn.ca/blog/reflection/living-and-learning-pandemic-creating-conditions-response-ability-flourish>



Photo Credit: Sylvia Kind, Atelierista

It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.

(Donna Haraway, SF: Science Fiction, Speculative Fabulation, String Figures, So Far)

In the current global pandemic, the pedagogical commitments that matter to teachers of early childhood educators living in these uncertain times determine how they walk alongside students. Teacher educators are being called to respond immediately to maintain learning for students. Teaching is being migrated to online platforms and modalities; practicum experiences are being simulated. These responses are framed within a student-centered approach as solutions to “get things back to normal” for students, minimize disruptions, support their well-being, meet their graduation deadlines and bolster their employment goals. But what do these responses *do*? Do they position students as consumers with a *right* to credits, as any consumer has a right to goods they purchased? Or do they ask students to take up the role of learner and consider how they will live well in a pandemic? The questions we ask are significant because they make visible the stories we hold and continue to enact in our educational practices. Donna Haraway (2016) asks us to consider the worlds our stories create: *Are these the kinds of worlds we want to live in?*

Living with the pandemic in the past few months has undeniably uprooted lives differentially, privileged a few above the many, and laid bare inequities rooted in market logics and power relations. As Judith Butler (2020) reminds us, [capitalism has its limits](#).

The authors of this blog have been working alongside other reconceptualist scholars committed to pedagogies that ask educators to walk with children in the messy, complex legacies of the 21st century (e.g., <https://www.earlychildhoodcollaboratory.net/>). Our work (e.g., <https://commonworlds.net/>) is faithful to questions that ask how to co-compose liveable worlds with others by creating spaces, as well as ethical and responsible connections, with human and more-than-human others. Yet, almost as if without thought, Kathleen moved to put her fourth-year undergraduate class online to allow students to graduate in June. In discussing her decision, we were curious why she slid so easily back to being regulated by discourses she has worked for many years to disrupt. Why, in a moment of difficulty, were discourses that sought to solve problems through reductionist methods informed by neoliberalism’s grand narratives so alluring?

The reader must know that the point here is not to suggest that the decision to put a course online was wrong or right. The point is to attend to the discourses that made the question to the put the course on-line possible. Foucault's (1983) words are helpful here: Instead of asking whether something is good or bad, he wants to know: What are the dangers? As Haraway (2016) reminds us, "it matters what matters we use to think other matters with" (p. 12). Thinking with both Foucault and Haraway *provoked us to consider different questions as teacher educators as we laboured to respond ethically during these times.*

What is lost when education functions as a service to maintain the economy? What learning is produced when educators respond to COVID-19 by enacting practices that work to smooth over difficulties for students? Are we "protecting" students from vital opportunities to live through/in the inevitable problems of life—opportunities that would equip them to nurture the disposition to walk with children in challenging and even hopeless times? What if we made space and time for students to struggle in this pandemic? What new ways of being and living together might emerge?

These questions are not intended to create universal solutions for teachers of early childhood educators living in a global pandemic. Instead, they are designed to help us weave contextual COVID-19 narratives to evoke pedagogies for response-ability (Haraway, 2016). Avoiding the lure of techno fixes (Haraway, p. 3) is one way students and educators can think together to respond ethically to a global crisis.

Now, more than ever, we need, as Haraway suggests, to cultivate response-ability "in the context of living and dying in worlds for which one is for, with others" (p. 231). Only when we are awakened to a "a social imagination where can we see a better way of life," [Maxine Greene reminds us](#), do we "find what exists unendurable." The pedagogical commitments we as early childhood teacher educators want to flourish are those that invite students to engage in pedagogies where we can imagine livable worlds.

References

Butler, J. (2020, March 30). Capitalism has its limits [blog post]. *Verso*. Retrieved from <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4603-capitalism-has-its-limits>

Foucault, M. (1983). The subject and power. Afterword in H. L. Dreyfus & P. Rabinow (Eds.), *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics* (2nd ed.; pp. 208–226). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Greene, M. (1998). *Imagination* [YouTube video uploaded April 3, 2015]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c9pwAi8-bZE>

Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.