

**DANGERS, POSSIBILITIES  
AND THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION  
An Interview with Prof. Svi Shapiro conducted  
by Prof. Sherry Shapiro**

(The original interview was conducted at the Adam Mickiewicz University,  
Poznan Poland on October, 10. 2014. What follows is an edited version of  
that interview)

**1. Tell us something about your personal and professional background and your present position?**

I grew up in London, England in a working-class Jewish family. My parents always voted for the left-of-center Labour Party. From an early age I considered myself a socialist and spent most of my youth in a Jewish Socialist Youth Movement. I lived for a few years in Israel before arriving in the United States where I completed my graduate studies. I was very much influenced by the youth culture of the 1960's. I have for many years been a Professor of Education and Cultural Studies and much of my work has focused around a doctoral program in Cultural Studies and Education. I served as a director of this program for several years as well as chairing the larger department of which this is a part.

**2. What has been the main focus and interest of your work?**

The main focus of my work has been in the connection between educational practice and policy, and social justice and democracy. More recently my work has focused on a related question of how education can be a vehicle for creating a less violent, more peaceful culture both nationally and globally. In all of my work I have been concerned with the way education raises questions about the moral and social purposes of human existence, and the way human beings relate to one another.

**3. You are well known as a critic of educational policy in the United States, can you speak about this? What are the problems as you see them?**

This question requires a much longer answer – one that questions who controls education, and for what purpose does it exist? Currently we see in the United States an increasing tendency to assess educational quality and outcomes through the use of an ever-increasing deployment of standardized tests. As many critics of education in the United States have observed, public schools in America have become little more than factories of testing. More and more time is given over to preparation for tests, teachers are forced to make test results the central concern of their teaching, schools are judged on these test results. The results have been deleterious for education. There is less and less time and opportunity for the classroom being a space in which critical thinking is developed, creativity encouraged, and imagination nurtured. For students schooling becomes more and more a site of boredom and stress. For teachers, education has little connection to the kind of work that they hoped and expected when making the decision to become teachers. All of this must be seen in the larger context in which education is increasingly defined as a function of the corporate economy and what is taught is valued only if it contributes to the formation of human capital. Not surprisingly school policies are set and legislated increasingly, not by educators, but by business interest and their political allies. This is a tendency that is apparent not just in K-12 schooling but even in the university system where any kind of education that is not applicable to the world of jobs and job training is viewed as irrelevant. The increasing influence of business interest allied to a right-wing politics has also meant the movement towards delegitimizing public education and replacing it with a system of private, often commercial, enterprises. Here the mantra is easily recognized as that of neo-liberalism; public services are to be eliminated or cut back drastically, the market place determines what is good for society. With its emphasis on privatization and competition the idea of education being concerned with the general improvement and welfare of a society is slowly gutted. The dominance of business interests and right-wing politics means that education as the vehicle for a critically aware democracy is undermined. So too, are the humanistic goals of education concerned with imbuing a younger generation with the desire for creativity, divergent thinking, imagination and a life of thoughtful reflection.

**4. Nowadays in the United States we hear a lot about the importance of technical training and skills. Given this tendency how important do you think the arts and humanities are in how we educate young people?**

Obviously parents are concerned that their children have the skills to enter the workforce that training and technical skills may provide. However, we must make a distinction here between the issue of training and education. Training is essentially concerned with how we get things done, manipulate and control our

environment. This is certainly a part of what it means to live in modernity. This must not be confused with education – education in its most profound sense is always concerned with deepening and expanding our humanness. It can be no surprise that in the priorities that are given to teaching in our schools those things that are concerned with the humanities and the arts have low status and even lower support in terms of funding. The latter areas seek to enrich the meaning of being human beings and to foster the question of why and for what purpose human life exist. The arts in particular connect us to questions about our subjectivity and the nature of human relationships. They seek to expand the human sense of possibility and to deconstruct our accepted ways of seeing in the world. They enable us to develop the sense of possibility with regard to how we live our lives, and how we relate to others. In a similar way the humanities seek to contextualize human life – to understand the broader cultural influences that shape human thinking and understanding. Schooling with its focus on analytic cognate abilities give precedence to the mind over body and the masculine over the feminine. In this sense we learn to devalue those things that have to do with human emotions, sensibilities, desires, and personal understandings. In the United States there is some recognition that the arts with their focus on imagination and expression can facilitate the acquisition of cognitive skills. However, this should not be confused with a more radical understanding of art as a vehicle for questioning and challenging the “taken for granted” world and for re-imagining the way human life can exist. The arts in this sense help us to break out from what Maxine Greene calls “the cotton wool” of existence, and what Marcuse referred to as “making the familiar strange.”

##### **5. When you talk about democracy and education in your work, and the importance of connecting education to citizenship, what do you mean?**

In answering this question, I want to begin by referencing the words of Hannah Arendt, the German Jewish philosopher, who in her commentary on the trial of Adolph Eichmann talked about what she called the “banality of evil.” Arendt, I believe was talking about a human condition in which individuals follow commands without question or sensitivity to their consequences. This image of human beings who have been schooled to thoughtlessly act in and on their world continues to resonate strongly with me. I teach my students that the first lesson in educating for democratic citizenship means to negate a passive conformist and quiescent way of being in the world. To be a citizen in a radically democratic culture must mean that we teach our young people to question and challenge where necessary the actions and beliefs of those in authority. Democracy is the antithesis of apathy, cynicism and thoughtlessness. Citizenship in this sense require what Henry Giroux refers to as “civic courage” – the willingness to question and interrogate the world that is usually taken for granted. It means a willingness to stand up for one’s beliefs. Of course, this assumes that individuals have beliefs – that is they have been able to critically question the forms of

behavior and ideas that hold sway in society, in other words the capacity to question what seems to be common sense.

Democratic citizenship should not be confused with libertarian individualism. In contrast to the latter, democracy has at its core a concern with the well being of all of those in society. It is not just about pursuing one's own private ambitions or desires. In this sense, democracy cannot be separated from the concern for social justice. Democracy is to be measured, as Franklin Delano Roosevelt famously noted, "not by the well-being of the most privileged among us, but by how we treat those who have least." So democratic citizenship is concerned with the public good much more than private ambition. It is important that these concerns not be understood as simply abstract theorizing. In the United States, as well as globally, we see an ever increasing polarization of wealth and privilege; to give one example, the family that owns the retail chain of Wal-Mart, now has as much wealth as the bottom 30% of American society. And in the world 85 families now have as much wealth as one-half the population of the planet! In America, with all of its wealth, 1 in 5 children live in poverty; 1% of the population has as much wealth as the bottom 40%. Of course there are other issues that demand democratic accountability and a generation brought up to ask hard questions about the way our world presently functions. We have to note, here the fact that while there is scientific consensus on the dangerous consequences of our continued use of fossil fuels, greedy and socially irresponsible companies continue their exploitation of carbon based energy sources. Of course the banality of evil today means the acceptance of continued violence against women and girls. It means, too, the blind acceptance of consumerism as the source of authentic human satisfaction. It means the continued violence against religious and ethnic minorities, and national economies in which the production of war materials play a major role in industrial production.

All of this may seem a long way from schools and education, but I do believe that teachers can play an important role in being catalyst for developing critical consciousness among young people, nurturing social responsibility, and solidarity with others who share both our national and global lives. In this sense, education for democratic citizenship is a matter of both *consciousness* and *conscience*.

**6. You have been strongly influenced by the ideas of critical pedagogy especially the work of the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire. Can you talk about his ideas and their importance to you? Freire argues that education is always a political activity. What does he mean by this?**

Let me start by noting the response of many of my students when reading the work of Paulo Freire. They are frequently, to use an expression, "blown away" by his words. I have often asked myself why this response. The answer, I think, is that Freire conveys a number of things in his writing. The first of these is the

sheer passion with which he speaks about the importance of education. For teachers working in public schools, suffocating under bureaucratic regimes, deadened by standardized curriculum and so on, Freire evokes and reminds all of us of the beauty and value of real education. Even as he aged into his late years he never wavered in his conviction that education was inseparable from what he called "the ontological vocation of becoming human." In other words, he spoke from a passionate conviction that our purpose on earth was always to realize the fullness of our humanity. This was for him a process that lasted as long as we live. This unfolding of our humanity was for Freire a cause of continuous joy. To be human is to be on a continuing journey in which we discover and realize the extraordinary mystery of human life. Of course for Freire this journey was never an individual one alone. The realization of one's humanity can never be separated from the realization of the human value of all people. So Freire celebrated life and the way that education infused us with possibility, but he also insisted that this process must be understood as a collective one that we undertake with all those others who share our world. This meant that education had a responsibility to act upon our world to ensure that all people can live as fully and with as much dignity as is possible. So in this sense Freire never separated his educational work from the politics of social change. The thread of social justice ran through all of his philosophy and his practice. Not surprisingly, Freire spent some of his life in a Brazilian jail, as his education was a catalyst for the poor to demand greater justice. Freire connected his phenomenological understanding of reality with a Marxist understanding of power and control. He taught us that educators must decide whether they are on the side of human liberation, or whether they taught obedience to systems of unequal power and opportunity.

For me, and for many others, Paulo Freire is considered to be the father of critical pedagogy – an approach to education that speaks always to questions of social justice and freedom.

### **7. Can you say more about how you understand critical pedagogy and its relevance to education today?**

I have already mentioned the importance of Paulo Freire to critical pedagogy so let me say a few things about my understanding of this philosophy and then discuss its contemporary relevance. First central to critical pedagogy is the question of the social. Education here is about the project of constructing a more and just and democratic society. It seeks to uncover the ways in which we limit and dehumanize individuals. It focuses upon the influence of ideology as the means in societies that call themselves democratic to accommodate the mass of people to inequalities and their subordination to the power of elites. Here, Freire's call to "problematize" the everyday realities of our lives becomes especially importance. Such problematizing helps us call into questions beliefs and practices that

legitimate, mystify and 'naturalize' the way reality seems to operate. In this sense knowledge and language are never innocent. They always help construct our notions of what is true and real. For Freire and other critical teachers education is always a matter of "reading the word and the world." Whether this is in the forms of textbooks or through the medium of popular culture a certain view of human existence, reality and values are always in play. So from this point of view, the classroom becomes a place in which both teacher and students are encouraged to question knowledge and to understand how knowledge and power become connected. But it is important to understand that this process of questioning and challenging, and thinking critically, is about much more than the usual academic goals. We question the world so that we are better able to challenge it and demand something better. Freire uses the terms *conscientization* that, for me, evokes the twin goals of education that are both to raise critical awareness or consciousness and to develop and sensitize our conscience. Critical pedagogy is at its core the passionate demand to understand how our world works in ways that do violence and dehumanize others and to be a catalyst for working towards social change that might empower and validate the worth of all human life.

In the classroom this means a space that in which student's voices and experiences become central to the process of learning. Here the teacher's role is to facilitate the way in which individual lives cannot be fully understood without understanding the social, political and economic context in which our experiences are shaped. This has special significance to those who have been marginalized or silenced because of race or ethnicity, gender or sexuality. The emphasis is on the Socratic tradition in which we question the purpose of our lives, the way in which we relate to others, what is held to be of value in our culture, and how do inequities bear down on the lives of different students within our classroom whether because of social class, race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, national origins – or anything that marks of as different or having less value. The classroom is concerned not with invidious competition between individuals but the development of a community of honest dialogue, empathy and compassion. The classroom also calls into question the usual structures of authority; teacher vs. student, those who know vs. those who don't know, rational vs. irrational, mind vs. body. Not least, student goals are not about grades, test scores, academic achievement but focus upon the ways in which we all might contribute to a more just, democratic and environmentally sane world.

Let me add finally that critical pedagogy is not to be understood as a formula for teaching but rather it is a continuing tradition of the application of critical theory and practice to the work of education. In this sense, critical pedagogy's initial concern with social class has expanded to embrace critical race theory, feminist and queer theory and other ideas that continue to expand our understanding of how we are shaped and influenced in the context of unequal relations of power and privilege. Critical pedagogy must also be seen as an important intervention

around the meaning of democracy and in particular the contribution of education to a democratic citizenry and culture.

**8. Can we return to your own identity and how you see the formation of your own thinking. Do your Jewish roots and experience influence your view of education?**

Jewish identity is always a complex amalgam of history, religion and ethnicity. In terms of religion let me say at the outset that no religion speaks for itself—it always requires human interpretation. And Judaism, like Christianity or Islam is replete with different, often competing, narratives and understandings of what the core beliefs and values are. So my take on Judaism is not necessarily one shared by other Jews—in fact in some ways it is quite oppositional to some other interpretations. The most obvious fact of Jewish experience is the history of persecution, discrimination and genocide. This certainly has meant that Jews have played a disproportionate role in left and liberal movements for social justice—movements for equal rights, civil rights, workers movements and so on. Whether in the United States, South Africa and elsewhere, you will find many Jews active in liberation struggles. This awareness has always been an important dimension of my own social and political commitments. In addition the Jewish tradition has always emphasized learning and intellectual activity—in earlier times around religious texts but later in the modern world through the broader spectrum of intellectual pursuits. One only has to think of seminal intellectuals such as Marx, Freud, Einstein, and Derrida to recognize that a critical intelligence has long been a part of Jewish life. An interesting dimension of this intellectual tradition is the acceptance, indeed encouragement given to discourse as one not of fixed understanding but as the product of continuing debate and discussion. This is represented in Jewish religious texts where a central sacred text is surrounded by the competing interpretations of the Rabbis. Jewish life has always been one in which the struggle around truth is always a matter of competing arguments and debate. I think that one might argue that the Jewish approach to knowledge already embodied a postmodern sensibility before this became a fashionable epistemological perspective. Easy to see where my own proclivity for critical theory and intellectual engagement comes from.

**9. You say in your writing that authentic education is always a moral and spiritual activity - what do you mean by this? How do you define 'spiritual' and how is it different from 'religious'?**

The meaning of the word spiritual is an elusive one. In the first place it helps to distinguish it from 'religion' with all of its connotations of an organized community involving membership, set rituals, specified sacred texts, believers and non-believers (interestingly many of my students now prefer to describe them-

selves as 'spiritual' rather than 'religious'). To use the term spiritual is to reference something deliberately ephemeral, hard to fully grasp. And yet it seems to speak to our need to see human life through a prism in which such life has an extraordinary preciousness and fragility, a mysterious depth, subjectivity that is never fully grasped (demanding perhaps the language of poetry more than scientific analysis). In this sense it stands in opposition to attempts to reduce human life to the computer like flow of electrons, or the chemistry of neuronal connections. It also speaks to a cosmology in which all life is inextricably connected – to a sense of 'oneness' that unites all life through both time and space, famously described by the astrophysicist Carl Sagan, in the way "we are all made of stardust". All life has common origins and each life represents a constant recycling of the same-shared elements. Such a view stands in sharp contrast to the day-to-day life in modernity where fragmentation, individualism and separation are the overwhelming human experience. Part of the beauty and mystery of the spiritual view is that it can suggest not just an ontological message of connection and interdependence, but also a moral sensibility of responsibility to others and the imperative for social justice, so movingly described in the words of Martin Luther King "the arc of history is long but bends towards justice." The relevant question, I believe regarding the spiritual is not whether it offers a true account of the world, but whether it now provides a needed language for expressing the purpose and meaning of human existence which technology, for all its brilliance, cannot supply.

**10. Perhaps this is an appropriate time to ask why you decided to focus on the issue of peace in your most recent book *Educating Youth for a World Beyond Violence; A Pedagogy for Peace* and what it might mean to educate for peace?**

Perhaps the more relevant question is why have educators not focused on this issue to the extent that our world demands it. It is not hard to see how much human lives are beset by the problem of violence. Wars, violence against women and children, ethnic and religious hatred, and the more subtle forms of structural violence- poverty, lack of adequate health care, lack of food. All of this in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century world that potentially offers humanity extraordinary possibilities to live longer fuller lives in harmony with each other and with nature.

Obviously I can do no more here than give a brief indication of what it might mean to educate for peace. Let me suggest four areas to be considered. The first has to do with what we have learned from postmodern epistemology, in particular the way this has called into question our notions of truth. We can see clearly how much our versions of what is true are conditioned by one's circumstance or positionality. I have spoken a great deal in this context of the conflict between Israel and Palestine. It provides a paradigmatic example of how different histories and experiences lead us to see the present conflict through very dif-

ferent eyes. It has been said, "my enemy is someone whose story I have not heard." So whether in this case or in so many other situations - Ireland, Kashmir, Ukraine, Iran - we must teach our students that there are multiple truths and divergent ways of seeing reality. I have suggested in my book that a postmodern perspective on reality must be met by a pedagogy that emphasizes listening to the others' story. It requires, if you will, the nurturing of an empathic sensibility on the part of human beings for the lives and experiences of others.

Secondly, there is the question of meaning. Sartre famously noted, "Man is condemned to meaning." This was never so apparent as in the world of consumerism and a deregulated capitalism where communities, traditions, and long-held values are disrupted and degraded. In this context, there is a hunger for meanings that might overcome the alienation and anxiety unleashed by such destructive influences. Here the search for meaning can take the dangerous and ugly direction of religious fanaticism, ethnic hatred, a regressive nationalism, or the demonizing of anyone who seems different from the norm. So here education's responsibility is to come off the sidelines and advocate for values that are life giving and life enhancing -ones that are inclusive and ensure justice and well being for all.

The third area is what is referred to in Africa as *Ubuntu*. This means that we see our lives first and foremost as part of a community. It means to transform our consciousness away from the emphasis on competition, hierarchy, separation and individualism. All of these fragment and divide human beings from one another. The emphasis on competition and winning is always predicated on a consciousness of scarcity - the notion that there simply isn't enough to go around whether in material terms or in terms of human value and recognition. This notion of scarcity is one that inevitability must lead to insecurity, resentment and anger. For educators, our responsibility is to encourage our students to see the possibility of a world in which communal relations and care for the other should take precedence over our emphasis on competition and individualism.

Finally, the fourth area concerns the increasing desensitization that we all experience as we are constantly exposed through the media and popular culture to human brutality, violence and callousness. Perhaps the proliferation of information and media sources has led the 'culture industry' to continuously up the ante on the degree of violence depicted whether in the news, television shows, movies, video games or through the internet. While researchers find it hard to document clear causality between this and real violence in the world it seems more than reasonable to assume that we are becoming increasingly immune or indifferent to images of human suffering and violence. We need an education that helps to re-sensitize young lives to the real effects of violence in all of its forms on the lives of real flesh and blood human beings.

**11. Has your focus on peace education been influenced by feminist scholarship and pedagogy?**

Undoubtedly so. One cannot follow the news these days without being made aware of the continuing struggle of women and girls, who represent one-half the human race, for their basic security and human rights. Still in too many parts of the world women and girls are made to be the subjects of war, violence and genocide. And even where this is not the case, girls are still struggling for the elementary right to education and the freedom to choose the lives they wish to live. Even in the more democratic societies women are vastly underrepresented in places of economic and political power. No critical pedagogy can ignore the influence of corporate advertising on shaping women's sense of agency and well-being. Advertising has the effect in the words of Jean Kilbourne of "killing women softly" – distorting and limiting the capabilities of women, and objectifying and dehumanizing them. Feminist pedagogy has made clear that the personal is indeed political. That issues of power and control over our lives exist not just in the macro structures of society but in the most intimate and informal spaces of human interaction. Beyond this feminist scholarship allied to queer studies has enabled us to grasp the fluidity and hybrid nature of human identity. We see through this work just how much human identity is constructed through multiple social influences, and how the unified self is an illusion which supports the mystification of individual agency and control over our collective circumstances. We are required to be suspicious of all those assertions of some essential form of human nature and to see how they work to undermine the possibilities of individual and social change. For critical pedagogy, feminist perspectives suggest that the classroom must always move between the personal experience of students and the larger social context. Here it is worth pointing out that women's voices are still frequently marginalized by the male voice. Creating a space, in which gender does not determine who is heard, or indeed what is the focus of our curriculum, continues to be important for those of us who seek to liberate through education. It is with such thinking that we must recognize the importance of extending the classroom space so that all voices and experiences can be heard and valued. Here I am thinking of the significance of including the lives and experiences of those who do not fit our ideas of heteronormativity – gay, lesbian, transgendered, and others, and to understand the challenge these pose to all of our notions of fixed identities, desires, and the institutions that support them. Finally, I think feminist critique has called into question our ideas of masculinity – especially masculine identities that are defined through violence, the power to exert control over other, the suppression of emotional and physical vulnerability, and sensitivity towards others needs and well being.

**12. Given all the social problems you have referred to in this interview, do you believe that educators can be optimistic?**

I would start with Antonio Gramsci's famous dictum "pessimism of the intellect but optimism of the will." Our intellectual understanding about the state of the

world – growing inequalities, increasing violence, environmental irresponsibility, certainly leads us to a state of pessimism. Yet, at the same time we can recognize the growing movements around the world that call for greater social justice, an end to violence, ecological sustainability. And, such movements, often through the use of social media, have found new and creative ways to resist a dehumanizing and dangerous future. However I believe Gramsci's optimism of the will was about something more than analyzing the threatening state of things. It seems to me that he was not so much talking about optimism, that is the inevitability of change, so much as a consciousness of hope. Here I am reminded of Walter Benjamin's words "That hope is given for the sake of those without hope." In other words hope is about believing in possibility even in the face of great obstacles. Despite everything the doors are always open to the possibility of repair and renewal of our world. But of course, history comes with no guarantees.

For educators, hope is connected to our existential choices and our moral commitments. It speaks to the question of what it means to live a meaningful life that connects one to the struggle for a better world. And, the moral commitment to advocate and educate for a world that is more caring, compassionate, just, democratic and peaceful. And this brings us back full circle to the question of what it means to be an educator. Here I believe that all of us in education must struggle against the narrowing technical role of the teacher and insist that meaningful education must always be about the development and nurturing of young lives in the fullness of their being. It is worth noting, here that in my experience, teachers generally decide on this career path precisely "to make a difference" (certainly it is not for monetary reward or higher status). My work as a teacher-educator has been always to speak honestly and directly to social realities but to articulate the importance and nobility of teaching. It is after all, the place where the dream of a different world can be nurtured and the hope of a better future can be encouraged. Education is, when all said and done, the place of possibility.