

Abstract

This article is an exploration of the potential of imaginary fiction as teaching research in a university classroom where the interests and ideas of students are taken seriously. The author reflects on his teaching practice, and through the use of a fictionalised discussion explores globalisation, and peoples' democracy in aid of uncovering potential spaces for expanding student and teacher learning.

Biography

Dr. J.M.C. Price is a former K-12 teacher, educational administrator, alternative school founder, and international development executive. Dr. Price is the co-founder of the Harvard Association Cultivating Inter-American Democracy. He has received numerous awards for his teaching including *Nipissing University's Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching 2007*, and the *Trent University Spirit Award 2002*. Dr. Price is a member of the *Distinguished Alumni* of Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario. Presently, Dr. Price is an Assistant Professor and teaches undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Victoria. Dr. Price's current courses include Mass Media and Education, Community and Culture in Education, Aboriginalizing Research, and Secondary Social Studies Education. Dr. Price's has lived, worked, studied and travelled extensively in the "Third" and "Fourth" World.

**Teaching Research through Imaginative Non-fiction: Exploring the Word of
Democracy for the World of Students**

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I originally wrote the imaginary on-going discussion that forms the heart of this paper in response to the intellectual push I received from undergraduate students I was teaching while completing my graduate studies at the University of Toronto. I dusted it off again in response to recent discussions with the students attending my mass media and education class at the University of Victoria. As a teacher, following in the tradition of critical educators, I strive to take seriously the interests, and views of students, and their communities, without romanticizing them. I try to honor by informing and challenging the political positions and theoretical frameworks that resonate with my students in class and online blog discussions. I take them seriously by further exploring for and with them the word of scholarly research and writing of relevance to their world and their vision of the future world (Freire, 1970, 1973, 1978, 1985, 1987, 1998). I try to focus my interventions into class and blog discussions by introducing the word of research and scholarly writing into the grounded world of our discussions together.

A number of students enrolled in my mass media and education course interested in alternative political movements and approaches to governance, especially as they relate to globalisation. During the Obama campaign and now in the computer screen glow of his victory, my students seem especially tuned in and turned onto the potential of digital

social and political networking technologies to further the cause of their preferred governance approach and model. In contrast to the popular constructions of the apathetic youth, they are very much aware that they are living in a political world; they just do not seem to like the politics of the world as it is. I suppose it would make some sense to call them antipathetic to representative democracy and unsustainable corporate power economics and politics, rather than apathetic. Although aware of the cliché popular culture representation of the “left coast” of Canada, I must admit I have been pleasantly challenged by the number of self-identified anarchists, libertarians, communitarians, neoprimitivists, and Indigenous governance advocates taking my class. These students and their more politically conventional or mainstream peers have shown surprising enthusiasm in class to the task of deciphering the complex positioning of the political content of web based mass media and school curriculum¹. They implicitly acknowledge the importance of identifying traditional political identities in analyzing mass media interventions, and like me, have difficulty comprehending all of the interconnections and contradictions, paradoxes, and possibilities of the political spectrum. I have been pushed by their interests in the organic mechanics of participative forms of democratic governance, and the role of new technologies and their potential for connecting people, ideas and resources in facilitating meaningful “citizen” participation in decision making.

In my practice as a critical educator, I acknowledge that whatever success I have had is founded upon my recognition that building community by and through generative dialogue and participative consensus based decision making is key to facilitating catalytic learning experiences. By classroom community, in the ideal, I mean a collective of diverse people sharing some common goals, respecting one another, and accepting shared

responsibility for learning and supporting one another through discussion, cooperative work and study inside and outside of class. Community classrooms demand much from their members, including open-mindedness, fair-mindedness, generosity, and a respect for evidence and example and for considering new information. In the community based ideal everyone shares responsibility. According to their comfort in class or online, using pseudonyms, num de plums or even nom de guerre's for curriculum content, defining questions or problems, generating a living glossary, materials and leading and contributing to discussions.

As introduced earlier my approach to teaching is to recognize, not romanticize the interest and agency, insights and abilities of my co-teachers (students). This is not to say that I am not a leader or authority in the classroom, (and institutional wielder of authoritarian powers of evaluation, censure, referral, in an asymmetrical power relationship with social economically, gender, creed, sexuality, and age diverse paying clientsⁱⁱ) it is just that I accept that I am not the only leader or authority in the classroom, and often, not the most important one? Further, I question the idea of a static curriculum that must be worked through, rather than defining a curriculum by working through telling questions raised by students.

Too what extent do we need to go to understand, relate, or be relevant in content and pedagogy to student visions of the future? To a great extent, for me good teaching is like good community based or Aboriginalised research (Kenny, 2004, Smith, 1999). Essentially critical teaching and community based research are both about respect, trust, generalised participation, mutual agreement on goals and methods, creating awareness, preparing for actions, sharing findings with broader community, removing language

barriers, and supporting free, open, generous and respectful expression (Kenny 2004, Smith 1999, VanManen, 1990, Weber-Pillwax, 2001). When I have been faithful to these principles in my classes the results have been humbling, as I have more often than not seen students transform from spectators to participators, from individuals who are not just speakers of good words, but doers of important deeds; and me from sage on the stage, the expert speaker of words of my own interest, to thinker and speaking servant of community. I truly believe democratic participation by its very nature is contagious and expansive (Price, 2007, 2008).

My hopes for this article are that by revealing my thinking and teaching and teaching research process I may engage practitioner readers who are interested in the process of my teaching, my teaching research preparation process, or the elliptical world of political philosophy and multiple approaches to governing people in an increasingly globalised age. I am familiar with, and in some defined cases sympathetic to arguments from the academy regarding the dangers of the oversimplification of complex philosophic and praxis related issues. That said my overarching purpose is not to “stay dumb,” (Lather, 1991) rather it is to stay awake to possibility as a teacher, and awaken other teachers to the possibility, and promise, of learning when one takes their students seriously.

For me, the question of working with students in the k-12 and post-secondary levels has always been a democratic question. I am convinced of the need to prepare youth for participation in a democracy through a democratic education. I contend that a democratic education must provide students voice and choice, at the moment of decision making in class. Educational democracy is based upon protection and provision, but it

must be understood as being animated by generalized participation (Price 2007, 2008). If I am educating children for active participation in a democracy, how do I do that, but a key question is also what kind of a democracy am I preparing them for? Formally trained teachers are taught and encouraged by official policy and curriculum to be focused on specific lesson goals or prescribed learning outcomes. The big question of how do the content, methods, materials used in my lesson contribute to the realization of the goal of preparing critically aware participants in local community decision making is not asked enough. Little attention is paid to the larger question of the nature of the future you are preparing this youth to participate in? What does an education that can produce more democracy look like? How does one attempt to educate according to the dictates of wisdom. For me a wise democracy is one that expresses the following core qualities, a respect for life and all life forms, generosity, fair-mindedness, a respect for evidence, example, and analogy, an appreciation of innate human rights and dignity.

The heartmind conversation I have created for the reader here is between optimistic skeptic I/me, which is the open me simultaneously giving voice to many different selves, influenced by students and many formal and informal, Indigenous and Non-Indigenous teachers I/me across time and space. I/me is also the intellectual skeptic self, not ready to define itself or remain the same exploring questions asked by students and left unanswered or fully explored in class.

In the imaginary discussion that follows I fictionally and playfully take considerable liberty with the philosophic stances and arguments, of thinkers and theorists Noam Chomsky, Gustavo Esteva, Madhu Suri Prakash, and Michael Walz. In short, these fine thinkers are used and ideas abused as literary devices in service of non-fiction

purposes. In the text, Ime, is the diligent optimistic skeptic teacher student me in a broad sense, Jamsky is playful me as an imaginary caricature of Chomsky, Jasevakash is me as a caricature of a militant Esteva and Prakash, and Jaslzer is me as a caricature of a cautious Walzer.

Ime: Jamsky, can I call you Noam? Noam, stoked to meet you! Long time listener first time caller if you know what I mean? You make novel, for me anyways, connections between ideological movements or currents of political thought, which I have never encountered before. Although others have drawn attention to the similarities between the state capitalist system of the former USSR and the capitalist-industrialist “democratic” west, you indict both in the strongest possible terms as being “deeply authoritarian”.

Jamsky: Without question they were fundamentally committed to oppressive authoritarian state power. The monstrosity that Stalin created out of the systems of Trotsky and Lenin was an ideological soulmate of America in the 1920’s, and America today.

Ime: You also identify in your writing a sharp contrast between these systems and the left libertarian tradition? What is with that?

Jamsky: Exactly, these, the state are great systems were and are dramatically juxtaposed to the libertarian left tradition, a tradition with its roots in the ideas and values of the Enlightenment. And it is here where we find surprisingly strange bedfellows, for within this tradition I place progressive liberals like John Dewey, elements of the Marxist anti-Bolshevik crowd, independent socialists of the Bertrand Russell variety, most libertarian socialists of the various anarchist movements, not to speak of major parts of the labour movement and other popular sectors (Chomsky, 2000).

Ime: I think I get it but to make full sense of this motley grouping I would need the political equivalent of your language acquisition device; our idea that language learning is hardwired into each of our brains. Perhaps, we need to exercise our political spectrum collation device, to make sense of the paradoxes of political philosophy, identity and affiliation.

Jamsky: It gets even more interesting if you follow this line of thought farther. For the independent left, of which Dewey is a good example, with its feet firmly planted in the soil of classical liberalism, spread its branches in opposition to the extreme absolutist tendencies of capitalist and state socialist governments and ideas, including the rather extreme form of absolutism that's now called conservative in the U.S.

Ime: I must admit I have never had even an inkling of these interconnections before, but I have noticed the connections between 20th century thinkers like Dewey and Russell. As you stated in your Mellon Lecture at Loyola University in 1994, Dewey and Russell shared an interest in the threats posed by capitalism to a truly democratic education. In speaking of his dream of a just and free society, Dewey envisioned education playing the key role in countering the oppressive nature of capitalist modes and relations of production

“The ultimate aim of production is not production of goods, but the production of free human beings associated with one another on terms of equality” (Chomsky 2000, p.26)

You also note Russell's famous words on the true goals of what education should be:

“...to give a sense of the value of things other than domination, to help create wise citizens of a free community, to encourage a combination of citizenship with liberty, individual creativeness, which means that we regard each child as a gardener regards a young tree, as something with an intrinsic nature that will develop into an admirable form if given proper soil and light” (Chomsky, 2000, p.26).

Ime: But how would these free and equal young citizens be governed and govern? If their association were to be based upon the values of sharing, cooperation and equality, how would they articulate and achieve their common goals? What forums, what instruments or institutions would they cooperate within, or govern within?

Jasevakash: Perhaps we can be of some assistance here since the questions you have posed directly intersect with our work on “peoples democracy”. Like the distinguished Dr. Chomsky much of our work has been in reaction to, or propelled by our fear of what we call the “Global Project”, and the very real apocalyptic threat it poses to the world of communities, who are being distanced, alienated and permanently removed from the governmental power equation by its inescapable momentum and profit based oppressive logic. Our belief is the only answer to the threat of the Global Project is peoples’ power.

Ime: So baroque. What do you mean by peoples’ power? Can you give us some background? How will this address the threat of the “Global Project”, and authoritarian state governments? Further, what would “peoples’ power” look and sound like?

Jasevakash: One at a time. First, let us fill in some of the blanks. “Democracy” as it is practiced in modern societies has become a “media event”, rather than the exercise of power. In our view even “the powerful” have found they are abstracted from the power equation to use your words. That is to say, they have been made irrelevant to the exercise of powers they themselves have defined. The real power to move and shake, structure and restructure has been ripped from their grasps by the transnational corporate actors of the “Global Project”, commonly referred to as Globalisation.

Ime: Forgive me for interrupting, but don’t you think you are exaggerating the effects of globalisation. I attended a lecture recently in which Anthony Giddens made a very good case for the argument that the national state still retains real power in the form of legislative discretion, and bylaw and law enforcement as well as their omnipresent military capability.

Jamsky (*in a very un Jamsky like way, actually sounding more like Donald Macedo*): Giddens and his third rate, sorry, third way thinking. He is a trilateral apologist. As if the people and national governments can control corporate transnational power with laundry detergent boycotts, and their pathetic anemic legislative feints at true regulation and the equitable distribution of wealth.

Jasevakash: Exactly. The fact for us remains that even in the post-modernist world, people act in the modern way of giving away their power to someone “up there”, and the someone up there gave away the farm, or had it ripped from their grasp by the inexorable reach of the faceless “Global Project”. They gave it away in corporate welfare, as Dr. Chomsky has been trying to tell us for decades now, and they gave it away in WTO, World Bank, IMF concessions and other free trade initiatives and are attempting to make the world one giant standardised market place of a very few winners, and a legion of losers. When combined with other efforts of the “Global Project”, like the United Nations, and the seemingly coincidental information technology explosion, the effect is the defusion of national, and localised power, rather than the diffusion of power.

Ime: Ok, if we concede that there are now economic-political and social forces beyond the control of the national state, and even beyond the control of what you refer to as the “self elected minority”. Does not the new information technology offer hope to local communities to reach out to other communities globally in an effort to increase their power through a “grass roots” combination or synergy of effort against these oppressive faceless captains of the transnational corporate government you construct as being behind the only minority, the social economic elite?

Jasevakash: All media is to open to exploitation. Who controls it? Even if the opportunity for combining local efforts for some kind of ironic global last stand against the global project is possible today, it will not be allowed to continue. It reminds us of a placard we saw held up at a recent WTO rally: “People of the World Unite Against Globalisation”. All efforts at protest, less than a radical reconstruction, a fundamental reordering of democracy is nothing more than pissing in the wind.

Ime: I strongly disagree you are not giving due credit to the possibility of new digital technologies, social networking alternative news, chat, blogs.....What is the answer then? How do we remedy the authoritarian state power exercised by the authoritarian self-elected minority, the elitists, and power aristocrats, while at the same time countering the threat of world wide production-consumption driven homogenization, you label the “Global Project”. If the answer is people’s democracy, democratic syndicate, whatever you want to call participatory governance how can we realise and practice peoples based democracy? How do we educate for it?

Jasevakash: We must uncover local spaces so that communities can govern themselves on their own terms, according to their own traditions. We must counteract the submission to the national state power that has been the bane of true democratic evolution. We must chop away at the trunk of national state power in order to discover that the heartwood is the people, that it is people in community, the local.

Ime: Sounds painful, even violent? I have not experienced violence building communities in real ways. I know the importance of baptisms in blood forging national mythologies, but I am sensitive to these images of chopping trees....regardless of my concerns with language...what does this community sovereignty, this peoples’ self rule look and sound like in real terms?

Jasevakash: If you take a look at the institutions that have evolved in the national state leviathan, that have been created by the dynamic inter-play of economic and political interests controlled by the authoritarian minority, you will see that historically this self-elected minority have injected our democracies with fear, misery and frustration? Peoples power would radically ameliorate these spectres of democracies past, that have resulted in the excessive codification of laws, rules, and regulations to protect property, to protect us from others and ourselves: by replacing it with a pluralistic jurisprudence. Jurisprudence appropriate to both time and place, that combines freedom from with freedom to conceptions of rights.

Ime: If you are not going to answer my democracy questions, can you give me an example of pluralistic jurisprudence in action?

Jasevakash: Radical democracy, or peoples power based on the “autonomy of urban and rural commons”, would allow for common sense to prevail. Non-violent criminal would not fear being imprisoned with the most violent members of the society. It would not be up to elected representatives to make laws to be adjudicated by appointed jurists, and enforced by the police, rather these decisions could be made by the people themselves, not in the form of laws, but by the organic articulation of guiding principles, like “be appropriate”, non violence, non-discrimination, equity, don’t charge usurious interests to your neighbors, don’t involve charities in stock market ponzy schemes ...commons sense, if you will. In the commons, fear would be replaced by trust, by knowledge of community values and tradition (Esteva &Prakash, 1998).

Ime: I am not getting a clearer picture of your vision, but I can almost hear the feint beginning of a piece of the chorus of your peoples’ tune, but how would you amplify peoples governance up from these locals? How would they conduct together? How would different communities play together? I don’t get the impression of a symphony; rather I hear a calamitous cacophony of traditional drums clashing with the songs of the mosque, and synagogue, and hip-hop, classical and even country twang

Jaslzer: The symphony of post-modernism, or a Bosnian death march?

Ime:...that is the question Welcome Dr. Jaslzer. May we call you Mikey? Thanks for...chiming in? What about your take on the community based construction of power and authority from your experience?

Jaslzer: Immediately, I think of a recent visit to Israel where I overheard an Israeli leftist respond to a lecture by a leading American communitarian theorist, he stopped the speaker cold when he said, “For you community is a dream. For us it is trauma”. It is a

fact that historically, and one can reasonable assume a reality of human coexistence, that strong ethnic and religious communities are often oppressive to many members of their community, especially women.

Ime: And children?

Jaslzer: Yes, anyone or anything seen as a threat, or in conflict with their historic community beliefs or tradition.

Ime: So will there still need to be a transcendent core set of values or principles that ensure tolerance.

Jaslzer: I think it is important to distinguish tolerance from toleration. Tolerance should be understood as a mental attitude, while toleration should be thought of as a set or series of social, political and cultural arrangement (Walzer, 1997 & 2008).

Ime: Well then, this begs the question, and I direct this to all of you, is it possible to respect Jasevakash conception of grassroots democracy, while constructing “arrangements” for toleration and cooperation within (intra) and between (ultra) the commons? I have to admit an image of people carrying their belongings over their shoulders seeking “their’ community keeps intruding on my consciousness as we speak, a kind of post-modernist rainbow diaspora. Perhaps for Jasevakash it could be viewed as a freedom march, but for those of us who have witnessed the misery of refugees escaping their long time communities it is a troubling, deeply disturbing one. I think of people voting with their feet. I still remember being in the Ogaden desert in 1991, after hitchhiking 500 km on top of a UN-FAO food truck out of Addis Ababa. I arrived in the morning, to see thousands Somali refugees of the inter-clan (closer than community, they are descendant of literally the same families) fighting, waking from another sleepless night in the surprisingly cold desert. I was hypnotized by hum of the flies, the smell of death, and burning excrement amongst these proud, noble, beautiful and intelligent people.

Jasevakash: Our immediate response would be that you have selected an extreme example. Th..(Interrupted)

Ime: I didn't select the example. I lived it. I have also experienced the divisions that inhabit what I would consider in most sense healthy "traditional" and Indigenous communities. Divisions of wealth and status most often created and exacerbated by colonial dictate that serve to create polarities in communities otherwise unified by common history, culture, tradition, ritual, language, and territory. How can diverse urban commons be expected to rediscover equilibriums of power, never mind peace and tranquility? Too few urban communities in contrast to some "indigenous communities", have ligatures and sinews of family and traditions and language to support community based decision making and jurisprudence. These connections between within urban communities are often weak, and are mostly rational legal and economic, in nature with and some limited civic and political engagement from some groups from different ethnic and linguistic communities.

In fairness, however, I must admit, I have come close to the ideal I think you speak of in one Indigenous community that has long secured substantive self governance. I am honoured by having been given the opportunity to learn from The Kuna People of the San Blas Islands (Kuna Yala Komarca). I was honoured to be able to work and learn with them and their youth, attend ceremonies, supervise community based research and observe the construction of a Congress during my years in Panama. This family based and place based Island community is held together, and the social peace is kept by a traditional forum, the Congresso, and the Sialah system of Headmen. Their democracy is rich in talk, and their culture protected by strong community regulation of tourism, research, and commercial development, and they have substantive representation and policy support through seats in the National Assembly in the Republic of Panama. While relying on the wisdom and experience of the Sialeh for community leadership, their role is more that of facilitator seeking out consensus and agreement. Although seemingly sexist on the political face, women own the means of productions (plantains, coconuts,

and gardens), and control the other most lucrative segment of the Kuna economy the production of trade molas (incredibly beautiful textiles). This specialisation or division of the commons, family and place based connections results in a high level of social peace and stability, and is supported by long and rich traditions of art, song, literature, and craft. There is little wealth gap in evidence in the Komarca and all are free from want for food, shelter, or companionship. In short, the islands of the San Blas are a model of peoples' place based power in action, a representation of the generous, artistic, inventive, and peace loving diverse spirit of humankind. A Utopia for non-materialists of the pre-modern, modern, and post-modern variety. But what forms of democracy will work in my city in Western Canada? What kind of citizen should we be educating? What kind of democracy can we hope to prepare them for?

Jasevakash: Hmm. We must definitely visit the Kuna..

IME: (interrupting mid comma) you will need permission.

Jasevakash:, but let us begin by saying that the transition to peoples democracy will not be tidy and orderly, nor it will proceed at the same pace every where, but will be gained one victory, one success at a time. Just as we have found conventional methods of research insufficient to the task of exploring “peoples’ power”, we also find our own knowing insufficient to grasp what efforts, initiatives, innovations, inventions, leadership, agitation, and other manifestations of peoples will, will be required to realise it in every corner of the world of communities.

Jaslzer: But what about the question of core “Rights” or guiding principles Ime raised? How will toleration be assured until tolerance is actualised?

Ime: Thank you Michael.

Jasmsky: Yes, indeed, even the so-called negative freedoms will have to be secured, as many “communities” especially your urban commons will continue to be incredibly

diverse. Not to mention, how do you plan on securing the positive freedoms in a world of communities? Will it be possible to assure everyone who wants or needs one, a job? Shelter? Food? A free lifelong education?

Jasevakash: Perhaps, you misunderstand us. We are not suggesting that we dismantle all the apparatus and functions of the “state”; we call for the slaying of the omnipresent-like presence of the National “state” in our everyday lives. In its place power would shift to localities, which would through empowerment be translated into communities. Words do not serve us well, and good examples are few and far between, but without sounding too much like Jeremy Bentham, the principle that government closest to the people is the best form of government, provides a starting place.

Ime: I wish you had more grounded examples. I guess there can be no experts on “peoples’ power” in this conversation. It is, as Myles Horton told us, a growing idea. Only those of us with lots of questions, and a hope for a future free from fear and want, a future free of oppression and discrimination, a people joined in free peaceful assembly, and justice seeking eyes free of the sting of pepper spray and the degradation of Orwellian Political campaign commercials... a future where citizenship is synonymous with the obligations and privileges of community membership. Last, for all the peace loving and gentle students who have tasted pepper spray as non violent participation in demonstrations in the commons.

At the end of this imaginary conversation I felt no closer to understanding the promise, possibility and problematic of place based participatory democracy, globalisation or to getting a firm grasp on the complexities of post modern politics. Yet, I have used the conversation to inform and guide my interventions in conversations and discussions in class.

I know the conversation has really just begun and has no finish in sight as my students and the world we share will change. I will need to continue to respond to my students, and truly respect their views, interests, and hopes for the future. I hope to continually explore imaginative fiction as a method teaching research, of engaging myself in

discourses of importance to my students and to my own hopes for new forms of participative democracies of content and process to emerge from places that respect the concept of community and voice. It is journey worth taking together in a race between education and catastrophe, and that in my view can only begin in de-schooled and re-schooled communities, where the aim of the overt and covert curriculum is not individualism and competition but building community, and producing more freedom, and more democracy.

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ⁱ In my mass media and education I strive to get students to think about mass media as curriculum and school curriculum as a form of mass media.

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