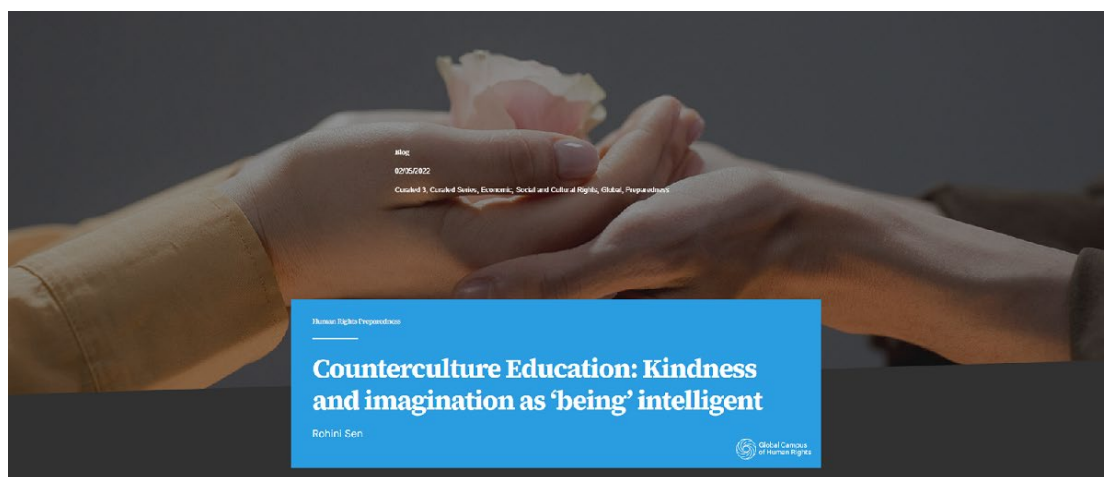




Counterculture Education: Kindness and imagination as 'being' intelligent

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Abstract: In framing education as a 'right', we often displace ways of learning that are inherent and indigenous to our everyday lives. Through counterculture pedagogy that thinks of kindness and imagination as forms of intelligence, education can be a collective endeavour where each of us are interconnected and knowledgeable in abundant ways.

This reflection is part of a very important discussion on the generational turn to new technologies and our responses to it as those in dialogue with human rights. The series, as one can see, grapples with a significant core question: the extent to and the ways in which human rights is/is not prepared for such technologies and ways to think about a human rights-based approach to emergent crisis in the digital age. While the broad questions posed here speak to the overall concerns, they are also external to this discussion in an important way. Through the idea of contemporary, digitised education, this piece urges us to look beyond a human rights based approach and towards other ways to think about learning, knowledge and access. In foregrounding kindness as a mode of pedagogy, we direct ourselves to examine *what* is offered as a right to education and

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unsettle, however lightly, common ideas of knowledge making and knowledge. When kindness is pedagogical, it disrupts education and thereby the *right* to it in the best possible way. This framing, when seen as analogous to the rights based approach, can work both *within* and *outside* of the rights based education paradigm. In conventional classrooms it is likely to foster a greater sense of community and dispel notions of competitive knowledge. And in spaces outside of such conventions, it is a simple reminder that knowledge inheres in even the most resource-deprived amongst us and, is a significant part of things we do everyday.

Contemporary education: Two modalities

Contemporary education, when looked at through the aforementioned binary of within and outside rights, operates in two broadly competing contexts. The first, is the neo-liberal, globalised paradigm, guided by the logic of 'knowledge economy'. Here, the primary focus is to generate human capital where *knowledge* and control over it are integral parts of [the production process](#). The second contains varying forms of generative practices including pedagogies rooted in indigenous knowledge, community based learning and the urge to move away from, or minimise this impulse of such production. The former is also marked by increased privatisation of knowledge institutions, technocratic interventions and commodification of education where 'quality' and 'standard' are determined by cost, managerial prerogatives of performance evaluation and exclusive access. Consequently, teaching and learning in such spaces are geared towards generating employability and productivity, now through the language of acquiring knowledge. The latter, then, becomes an exercise in both speaking to the broader harms of not taking nuanced intersectional approaches to the problem of education as well as outlining some of these approaches. I call them competing contexts but in a modern, enmeshed world of digital capitalism, this relationship is one of mainstream and peripheral modalities sometimes co-existing in peculiar ways.

In this account of a growing knowledge industry, the idea of education as a right and the persistent inequality of access raises some important questions. Much like the broad oeuvre of the human rights movement, the conversations about unequal education (in and beyond the digital age) are better served by implicating human rights as one of the [root causes](#) of such inequality. As mentioned before, this is not so much a *for* or *against* account of what purpose rights serve. Rather, it is process of careful problematisation through a different pedagogical lens where we use kindness and its generative potential to understand the recurrent motifs and ask ourselves:

- How does knowledge production happen in capitalist modernity?

- In what mode will knowledge reach those who do not produce it?
- Who will set the terms of what constitutes knowledge?
- What will be erased in the course of this process?

These questions help us think about what the [right to education](#) truly entails even as we demand them from states. To contemplate these questions as knowledge interlocutors means to acknowledge the histories of colonial and post-colonial injustices of structural violence and conquest, exploitation of resources, normalising their unequal distribution and ownership as 'development' and *then* think about what education means within this paradigm. Oftentimes both the guarantor and guarantee of such rights are coloured by exploitative, invisible historical continuities, much to our discontent. And in such instances, we can engage with such conflicting positions through counterculture pedagogies of imagination and kindness.

Leaning towards counterculture education

Learning is an idiosyncratic, diverse and emotional process. Pedagogy (not limited to classrooms) should reflect and account for this nonlinearity. This is particularly useful for pedagogical processes that hope to create cooperative knowledge communities and step away from contemporary education's implicit codes of [individuality](#), [bias](#) and epistemic violence. When whiteness, maleness and their cultural proxies are the norm, issues of what kind of voices, self-expression and imagination are encouraged and which are being penalised may be subverted through cultivation of praxis that imagines beyond our immediate communities and realities. What, then, are some ways to move away from the impulse of production? Perhaps, we contemplate a [pedagogy of kindness](#) where guilt, fault finding and a naturally discriminatory tradition of learning are set aside (or at the very least discouraged) as functions of capitalism. In centring kindness as a process, we generate a relational pedagogy of actively practising imagination and looking beyond oneself. A pedagogy that is grounded in ['believing people, and believing in people'](#) despite the difficult and overwhelming task of disregarding the imperatives of the current system. And this pedagogical process of kindness and imagination are seen as inherent forms of knowledge that are environmentally embedded in all of us as against our orthodox idea of claiming it as a right only through a privileged pathway of cognitive acquisition, from one brain to another in structured places. The inevitable question that follows is: Why kindness and how do you educate yourself and others in it? Kindness is perceived as an emotion and not a marker of intellect. Kindness as a form of pedagogy makes a case for ethics and morality perhaps, but not common-sense understanding of intelligence. But what if this, too, is a capitalist sleight of hand by the structures and processes that define knowledge? What

happens if we think of kindness and imagination as foundational forms of intelligence, the enhancement of which can produce minds that can conceive of possibilities beyond their own experience and prepare for the unexpected? Learning here is a somatic and cognitive process of everyday practice and experiences.

Some examples

Let me offer a few instances of such pedagogical practice. A pedagogy of kindness and imagination is more than nurturing a compassionate learning space or care. It is also a way to think about the deeply interconnected lives we have been leading through historical enmeshment. And this can happen both within and beyond conventional institutions of education and their practice. In some instances, this can be a collaborative classroom where educators and students create their courses together and assess their own learning through self-reflexive practices, without the spectre of grading. In others, this may mean engaging in intentional listening as an integral practice of critical learning in our everyday lives. In most of my courses, particularly on Critical Approaches to International Law, we have frequently, collectively asked ourselves why we are learning this subject and what does that mean for each of us outside of classroom spaces. And sometimes, the pedagogical process has involved sitting with disappointment, despondence and anger at the structures that incapacitate and implicate us in so many ways. Instead of thinking about 'how can we translate this knowledge into productivity', pedagogies of kindness and imagination should compel us to ask 'how are we in this together' and 'who, among us, are better placed to initiate structural changes'.

A pedagogical turn to kindness and imagination

Such pedagogical imperatives are not simply skills or approaches. They are also deeply rooted in operational mechanisms of the human brain. Theories about human intelligence have always been metaphorical, reflecting the most advanced thinking of the era that [nurtures them](#). Consequently, the most recent and dominant metaphor has been intellectual property and computer processing as analogous to the human brain. This logic is based on the faulty premise that all entities capable of behaving intelligently are information processors. And this underlying logic governs both capitalist pedagogy and control of its production in education spaces leading us to rely on retention and 'thinking about the world' as markers of intelligence. But contrary to this misguided metaphor, the human brain is a chaotic, inexplicable process where memory and imagination both perform similar functions of 'the mental rendering of experience'. Imagination and memory both use [a cognitive network](#) for

'simulation' turning sensory experiences into a narrative filled with emotional responses, interpretation and evaluation and it is this imaginative capacity that is the real key to the fluidity. Our realities, thus, are not a distinction between the real and the imagined, but between two types of imagination one interwoven with reality and one more distant from it. And kindness is simply a praxis of imagination where we are able to envision a world beyond immediate realities and ourselves.

Understanding kindness and imagination as learnt pedagogical practices is perhaps the most authentic measure of what the human brain deems intelligent. To nurture and cultivate these as intentional academic standards may genuinely help us grapple with causes of inequalities rather than its effects. Importantly, learnings of such nature are often not willed and have far greater influence than when one is 'working' to learn in academic spaces. And is precisely this inherent quality of such cognitive impulses that allow for an imagination of education beyond rights into one of everyday existence. However, for those of us who can access institutional education with all its sophisticated expressions, the least we can do is make its very premise accessible to our collective selves. In an increasingly unequal and digitised world, mental states and beliefs extend far beyond the body into daily practices and artefacts. If such be the case, then, a pedagogical turn to kindness and imagination may be just the thing that allows us to discard our standards and displace our excesses into shared ways of learning, thinking and doing. An imagination of education not as a right to claim and fight for in incongruous climates but, as an embodied and continuous form of ourselves.