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Stranger in a strange land – reclaiming the terrain for a disorientating dilemma and the possibility of forgiveness

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ACT I 'Our revels now are ended'

In the *Tempest*, Shakespeare exiles Prospero to an island in order that he and we might learn something, a propitious starting point for our conversation here about education. Prospero is allowed to keep his 'powerful knowledge' (which cost him everything else) for as long as it benefits him, which is to say: until he learns better. The play finds him after seven years 'hard at study', dragged from his books by outside events. He is not yet 'woke' but in causing the storm he is catalyst for the play and agent for Biesta's 'learning as a reaction to a disturbance, as an attempt to reorganise or reintegrate as a result of disintegration'(Biesta, 2005: 62).

Shakespeare challenges us to respond to "what is other or different, to what challenges, irritates and disturbs us" (ibid.; 62), a parallel to Mezirow's disorientating dilemma, which precipitates learning transformations. This is what this chapter proposes - Further Education as a space to *become*: a humanist view. For instead, we have built institutions that are designed solely to sign on, zoom in, and churn out, where a college is a machine for conditioning 'reflexive impotence' (Fisher, 2009: 21) – an institutionalised sterility and self-fulfilled pathological apathy among FE youth that essentially prohibits personal transformation in order to preserve a particular state of things.

Against this is the view of knowledge by authority as capital, which can be stuffed inside students to open up their worlds, with no regard for students' apprehension to be in that world or for their own agency to act on this world. Prospero, arguably the ultimate omniscient and omnipotent author of reality, perceives learning as the acquisition of something external. Yet he comes to discover that learning can also be a cumulative cycle of disorientating and orientating states, symbolised by the storm that brings the sailors to the island. The island in the *Tempest* is sanctuary for ludic experience: a holding environment (Winnicott, 1971) where learning as 'becoming' thrives in an ongoing process of inner and outer-exploration. Here there is plenty of evidence of the 'risk' that has been cleaned out of contemporary FE: 'the risk that you will learn something that you rather didn't want to learn, something about yourself, for example' (Biesta, 2005: 61). Of course, all learning – including that realisation of our own powerlessness – represents a risk of entering new territories. In the play, for example, Trinculo and Stephano are bewildered and *afear'd* (though hardly assured by the knowing Caliban) of the foreign domains they enter. They resist the strange. As in our current sector, the terrain has been designed by those furthest from its boundaries and alien to its intrepid navigators (teachers *and* students).

Caliban and Miranda are symbols of subjugation - to become civilised. One is bred to harness the other to 'station', but subjects both of an education predicated on procedure and predestination. Caliban, bred to serve, is being tamed by force ('By sorcery he got this from me') in a tradition which pits culture against anarchy and aims to tame the savage breast of the beast that seeks to 'violate my child'. It seems that time has caught up with Prospero and it is time told on a body clock by Nature. His focus on the derangement of Caliban is pure projection, damning him as generations of the poorest sort of kids have been

damned for generations: suitable cases for treatment, yet unsuited for instruction, since 'human beings may be equally endowed with dignity and rights, but they are not academically equal and do not have the same academic needs' (Johnson, 2006). Three hundred and fifty years before a sociology of education emerged, Shakespeare manages to find the pertinent vocabulary for Caliban 'A devil, a born devil, on whose nature nurture can never stick'. Moreover, in a heart-felt plea perhaps to those who have given of their best before and failed with 'these kinds of kids', the 'ne'er-do-wells', Prospero continues: 'on whom my pains, humanely taken, all, all lost'.

ACT II – 'Your future dream is a shopping scheme' (Rotten)

Caliban is neatly cast as the 'peripheral participant' (Lave and Wenger, 1991), he is 'other peoples' children', NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training): the ultimate outsider. The role of Caliban, like the threat of the uneducated and disenfranchised, is both real and created, an apparent problem of civilisation that we have both the right and the responsibility to fix. For Miranda, whose fate is constructed as the very antithesis (she is bound to succeed, though she too must pay a price for an equally constructed nature, predicated on passivity), Caliban is that which 'I do not like to look upon': the NEET peripheral participant pushed outside - where they may well be happy to be, given the state of the inside.

Like generations of young people Caliban struggles to find a place: he is of the underclass who understands all too well what is offered him and his refusal to accept is a beautiful negation of all that we are. And so he lurks, watching, waiting. These are not only a

generation under-nourished by the profligacy of an instrumentalist education system, but they are distinctly underwhelmed by what society's instrumentation has on offer for them. Every college is homogenous and why work hard, anyway, if every right that others had is withdrawn, then scornfully labelled an 'entitlement' if it's demanded? Why work hard at all if you will never secure the basic foundations afforded you, because Power has given everything to those with the most capital? This means those students who have trained for trades, only for apprenticeships to undermine their enterprise; students who trained for health care, only for agencies to undercut their prospects; or students who trained for creative industry, only to face paying for an internship. This is to say nothing of those who studied in order to study Higher, only for tuition fees to be piled yet even higher. They learn to become the underclass, silent at the underbelly with no means to protest, except by non-compliance, divergence and refusal to participate.

Caliban claims his own platform because he is a lost cause with little authentic opportunity to say who he is and where he stands. He is the challenge to any system of education or individual teacher whose first responsibility is to enable the student to be unique and become individual. Peim writes about the notion of education as a 'gift' as 'an offer that you cannot refuse' when for 'certain segments of the population it is also, at the same time, an offer you can't accept' (Peim, 2013: 38). Because it is represented as 'a gift that keeps on giving', those like Caliban, who lack engagement 'may be represented as being in need of reorientation, salvation and realignment' (ibid.; 38). While this sounds alarmingly like dystopian 'reprogramming' of the mind, Fisher sees students as caught in a double-bind of 'business ontology', where they are 'stranded between their old role as subjects of disciplinary institutions and their new status as consumers of services' (2009:22). Students'

disorientation in this holding place of FE must lead to them rejecting the continual pursuit of ephemeral pleasure and self-fulfilment that has been promised them and instead – we endorse – they seek the boredom (of self-improvement) that comes from intellectual labour. Education may not set you free (on their terms), but it can set you free (on your terms).

Miranda remains open to the new, the possible and transformation. Where the traditionalists reconstitute this narrative as a 'tale as old as time', Miranda might be expected to take her place in the natural province of the privileged, wherein being educated just means being who you are and knowing what you know. However, she is first cast into a wilderness where this status becomes meaningless as the curriculum is lived, not invented. Prospero invokes a formal Masque to mark the transition from one illusion (an isle full of noises as the music of youth) to the no less illusory world of *Realpolitik*, ('news from the Rialto' as Shakespeare memorably coined it elsewhere). The play exemplifies Žižek's notion that 'the fundamental level of ideology is not an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality' (1989:33). Students are subordinated to an order that is assumed to be real and, as Fisher explains, they have long since given up thinking Reality (®) can be any other way than that which is proffered them. The student must relinquish agency to play a part (a role) in a marketized world and their undignified duty in FE is to reify the impossible dream of capital: 'The role is a consumption of power. It locates one in the representational hierarchy… at the top, at the bottom, in the middle but never outside the hierarchy… The role is thus the means of access to the mechanism of culture: a form of initiation.' (Vaneigem 1994: 132). The GCSE re-sit in FE represents this rite of passage into society, the qualification an unwanted ticket to ride. Year

after year of repeating a tired trial renders ‘re-sits’ as ever such. You can only escape the mechanism by embracing the mechanism, otherwise you churn around again or become NEET (and capital barely affords you that option, nowadays).

Marx said that ‘Every emancipation is a restoration of the human world and human relationships to man himself’ (Marx/Engels, 1978:46) and that is our premise here for a renewal of the project of Further Education as the home of the genuine second chance. It must be so much more than the repetition of what was performed in school. If all can be emancipated as all those who experience the Tempest are, then who knows what might be achieved. ‘Emancipating students requires only a supply of emancipated teachers’ but conversely ‘what is similarly required for the intellectual enslavement and control of students is a reliable supply of teachers prepared to be themselves controlled’ (Bennett, 2019: 19).

ACT III ‘What’s Past is Prologue’

The present state of FE is as the Tempest on paper: static, flat and monochrome, but easily transformed if imagined into a more exotic space. And what should this be? Biesta has argued ‘if education is indeed concerned with subjectivity and agency, then we should think of education as the situation or process which provides opportunity for individuals to come into presence, that is, to show who they are and where they stand’ (Biesta, 2005: 62). Like Miranda, Caliban himself is entirely engaged with his ‘education’ though his is in a beautiful resistance of active defiance, taunting Prospero ‘You taught me language… I know how to curse.’ Caliban is an anomaly to the narrative of compliance: an ‘under-achiever’ who

refuses to know his place. He is claiming a right to respond and thus taking part in educational discourse with a subjectivity that is thoroughly social. This is what is missing from college education: the freedom to learn to become… in good time. The freedom to learn to make choices, to make mistakes, to become active, to resist and to exist without limits and restrictions.

The Tempest's cast illustrate irreducibly unique personhoods which echo a diversity of lived experiences in FE. So as we move towards the end of our conversation, for now, what might we learn from the Tempest about a humanist view of the purpose of education? How can FE reclaim its dance in the space of appearance between inner and outer explorations? The space of appearance ebbs between education as a process of socialisation and learning towards subjectification (Biesta 2013). Here, education is more than business ontology but as an experience to learn about being an authentic and active person in an existing world; a world that we might choose to conserve (through the hopeless inaction of reflexive impotence) or to change (Arendt 1958). And how does the Tempest challenge us to respond to that which disturbs us? It seems that the experiences that disturb or disorientate us can indeed become quite powerful in stirring the imagination away from that which is proffered to us.

The first step is to overcome the imposition of fear in a conditioned and mythical world. Miranda does this in the Tempest. She is seen to be innocent and naïve and yet she is aware of her worth and what she has to offer. Miranda knows that she has a choice; being passive to Caliban's heartless demands would be dangerous, as would a simple acceptance of Prospero's ignorance. In her actions we witness the implications of strategic compliance and resistance (Shain and Gleeson 1999). Despite the despotic power of those around her she

calls on her humanist view of the world to initiate change and freedom. She cares enough to act and challenge the empty words of Prospero and the brutal deeds of Caliban, because she values fairness and justice and realises this through her agency to take action upon the world. Miranda takes notice to act in light of her 'disorientating dilemma' and disturbing experiences. She sees the importance of 'promise and forgiveness' in safeguarding human relationships and her own emancipation. Just as Higgins' states that 'by offering promise, teachers hedge against the risk and unpredictability of human action and with forgiveness they are able to release others from the irreversibility of their actions' (Higgins 2011: 100), it is Miranda's care for human affairs and associations that echo hope for the purpose of education and where FE can reclaim its dance without restrictions or fear. In FE, every individual ought to hold the promise of a new beginning where to act means to be able to seize an initiative, bring about change and begin anew (Arendt, 1958). FE can hold the promise of transformation so that students and teachers can move away from being peripheral observers. There is scope for students and teachers to take risks and dance: to be redeemed, as Caliban is; to self-actualise and learn to become oneself, as Miranda does.

Unfortunately trepidation emerges with uncertainty and like the chaos of a shipwreck students and teachers wonder what happens should they get the dance wrong. Too often students and teachers in FE are conditioned through fear, anxiety and the concerns of vengefulness. They are affected by conditions of banal complicity, rather than conviviality. Bureaucracy, the onset of professional regulation and the demise of thinking space create circumstances where it is safer to be tamed than to act with initiative and integrity. How can teaching staff consciously promote self-determination, agency and self-actualised becoming in their students, when it is hamstrung in their own every working day practices? Abhorrent

environments impact the sense of self and close down collective space to consider different ways of being. Students and teachers become weary and wary of the fantasies structuring their realities. They must not let go of their freedom and like Miranda they must use their capability to act in order to choreograph their own dance resisting ridicule and regress.

FE is a beautiful risk that is rich with lived experiences from different agents who act in unpredictable ways. It is renowned for offering transformative educational experiences with responsibility for social and moral justice. FE must not merely supplement wider political agendas towards churning out servants for the labour markets and capital gain. Like Miranda, those who truly care for education must safeguard what is precious to them: the moral purpose of education from a humanist point. Students are part of the FE dance too. What we need are teachers who are prepared to engage in the risks and are well informed about education, society and moral justice (Ball, 2016). FE needs teachers who offer hope for change through engaging in critical reflexivity and through relational contexts to initiate new beginnings. It needs those who are committed to the heart and the head, who provide time for the imagination to play, who create safe spaces (the solace and refuge of an island) for students to disclose unique selves in an old, existing world. Educationally this means that the responsibility of the FE teacher, like Miranda, needs to be directed to the maintenance of a space in which, through promise and forgiveness, freedom can appear (Biesta, 2013). A brave new world where thinking students and teachers become agents that can challenge the 'dangerous distortion of perceived reality' (Allen, 2002) and contest the external powers that deprive of thinking, acting and dancing space.

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