

Defeating Despair

This article is excerpted from "Rethinking Globalization: Teaching for Justice in an Unjust World," edited by Bill Bigelow and Bob Petersen. [Click here](#) for more information on this book.

By Bill Bigelow

How can we teach about the enormity of injustice in the world without leaving our students in despair? In discussions with teachers over the years, that question comes up repeatedly. If we've reached any consensus, it's that no matter what curricular steps we take to address students' hopelessness, we can never do too much.

An interesting irony is that the more clearly students see the interconnected nature of global problems, the greater the danger that this awareness will overwhelm them. As one of my students lamented: "If everything is connected, then you can't change anything without changing everything. But you can't change everything, so that means that you can't change anything."

But there is a hopeful dimension to the world's growing interconnectedness: We have more opportunities to recognize the far-flung social and ecological webs that we are a part of, and simultaneously more points of leverage to make a global difference. The ubiquitous reach of globalization offers the potential for new allies, and increases the vulnerabilities of those who profit from the system.

For example, in her article last spring for *Rethinking Schools* ("The Student Union vs. Jostens Inc.," Vol. 15 #3) high schooler Andrea Townsend tells how students discovered that their graduation gowns were sewn by underpaid workers in Mexico, shipped great distances consuming fossil fuels, and sold at exorbitant prices to U.S. students. Because of the corporate concentration in the market for graduation goods, Townsend's discoveries were immediately relevant to teenagers whose schools also contracted with Jostens, the transnational corporation that produced their graduation gowns.

As many Portland students sensed through their confrontation with Jostens, hope can emerge in the process of trying to make change. "[N]o one who has tasted the thrill of solidarity can go back to fighting alone," Townsend notes in her article.

QUESTION OF ALTERNATIVES

In *Rethinking Globalization*, we don't feature classroom activities that present full-blown, worked-out alternatives to corporate-driven globalization. Frankly, when I've tried to design lessons to get students to imagine overarching social alternatives, these have not been compelling. The distant and utopian feel to imagining the Good Society can unwittingly make fundamental change seem less attainable, and more dream-like.

This is not to say that imagining alternatives is unimportant. On the contrary, if we don't find ways to emphasize possible alternatives to today's increasingly privatized, ecologically ruinous version of globalization, then we run the risk of losing students to cynicism. Writing about how McCarthyism crippled U.S. political discourse long after Joseph McCarthy was gone, *Salt of the Earth* director Herbert Biberman said, "One was free to attack our mores, institutions, personages without limit or fear, so long as one also despaired and offered no alternative." Critique without alternative equals despair.

To provide a sense of alternatives, we have focused more on highlighting concrete examples of past and present resistance to the dire threats posed by profit-driven globalization. *Rethinking Globalization* is filled with instances from which students can find hope and vision for the future.

But unless teachers make these examples explicit, students may continue to lock in on, "This is sooooo depressing," and fail to recognize the glimpses of hope along the way. Thus it's important to draw students' attention to how moments in the past and present can prefigure aspects of a world we'd like to live in. Over the course of a school year, we can also help students recognize how much their own global awareness has grown, and perhaps their commitment to act for justice. This too can be a source of hope.

VIEWS OF HUMAN NATURE

Arguments against radical change are almost always premised on gloomy portraits of human nature: People are *naturally* selfish and materially acquisitive. Hope for a more cooperative, egalitarian, and peaceful future must be grounded in a contrasting set of interlocking beliefs about human beings. These beliefs - abundantly highlighted in *Rethinking Globalization* - include:

- **People can recognize and act on their connections to others around the world.** Countless individuals featured in the book see and act on a "self" interest that includes others. Langston Hughes addresses himself to the British empire in the poem "Gandhi is Fasting," as he applauds Mahatma Gandhi's fast against colonialism, "For I am also jim crowed - as India is jim crowed by you." Craig Kielburger, at 13-years-old, organized Free the Children to fight child exploitation around the world, but also to empower young people in North America.
- **People can develop great courage as they struggle for better lives for themselves and others.** Honduran unionist Yesenia Bonilla daily "has to leave her fear behind" as she risks her livelihood to struggle for workers' rights. Leticia Bula-at describes the courage and collective determination of the Kalinga women to oppose the destructive Chico Dam project in the Philippines: "For us, land is life, it is sacred. ... This land is what kept generations of our people alive and this is where we are going to die. ..."
- **People have a tremendous capacity to change and grow.** Students in New Jersey teacher Maria Sweeney's fourth grade class went from zero to expert as they learned about sweatshop conditions around the world. When their principal banned as "inappropriate" the play that they had produced, the kids ended up performing it on Broadway. Bob Peterson reminisces about his transformation from privileged middle-schooler to social justice activist as he relentlessly pursued "Why?" questions when confronted with scenes of child poverty in Egypt. Rodolfo Montiel went from Mexican peasant/farmer to prominent environmental activist, winning the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize, as he came to see the destructive relationship between logging and topsoil-stripping floods. The roadblocks he built to halt logging trucks landed him in prison, but his actions initiated an international solidarity network.
- **Ordinary people can confront injustice and make change.** Certainly, the above individuals reveal this. There are many more stories in this book: The Huaorani Indian Moi and fellow tribespeople who have resisted the invasion of their lands by oil companies and "settlers" in the rainforests of eastern Ecuador. Maquiladora worker Omar Gil, who bounced from one low-paid, dangerous job to another, but never lost his hope for a better life, and became a union activist: "Nothing will ever change if we just sit on our hands. You have to keep trying and trying." The low-income multinational, multiracial, multilingual coalition in Los Angeles challenged the city's biased transportation priorities - and offered object lessons in the importance of race and class analysis with humor and intelligence (as described in the video *Bus Riders Union*, reviewed in the book).

You get the point. Belief in the possibility of a very different, very much better world must be grounded in the confidence that ordinary people are capable of creating such a world - that human nature is not narrowly self-centered. There are countless examples in *Rethinking Globalization* that offer students supporting evidence.

PROSPERITY AND FREE TRADE

Another related argument against fundamental change - one that has gained new momentum in the era of globalization - is that people really don't need to work for a radical redistribution of wealth and power, because prosperity is the product of free trade. Indeed, taken to its logical conclusion, people don't need to work for justice at all - the market will take care of that. As *The New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman argues, global trade expansion is "the only route out of poverty for the world's poor." The only route. Not unions, not women's organizations, not solidarity movements, not alliances of farmers and workers - just more global trade, more foreign investment, he says.

Put another way, here's the argument: Corporations' and individuals' zeal for private gain will lead to social betterment; the pursuit of one's own riches will diminish the poverty of others. This self-serving formula corresponds precisely to my dictionary's definition of "superstition": an irrational belief that an action not related to a course of events influences its outcome - that somehow, free market alchemy turns greed into good.

No, meaningful social change must be made by human beings, *organized to bring that change about*. The people mentioned above - Craig Kielburger, Yesenia Bonilla, et al. - are not simply Lone Rangers for justice; they are embedded in social movements that inform and amplify their efforts. For our students, hope needs to be grounded in that knowledge. We need to familiarize them with an array of social movements for global justice past and present - not uncritically, but to alert students to the role that these movements have played, and could play, in global transformation.

It's vital that students come to recognize the importance of collective action because so much of young people's education emphasizes the opposite. For example, they learn about Rosa Parks, the tired but heroic lone seamstress who challenged segregation and launched the modern Civil Rights Movement. But they rarely learn that Rosa Parks was long active in a movement that consciously sought to overthrow white supremacy. Textbooks and teaching materials often allow Great Individuals their moments in the curricular sun - e.g., Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela - but rarely the social movements that nurtured and ultimately were responsible for whatever accomplishments they are credited with.

Students may find persuasive evidence that change is possible by "meeting" the myriad organizations that comprise today's global justice movements. Encountering these groups allows students to recognize concretely the outlines of a more hopeful future that is immanent in the present. And because, increasingly, social justice groups offer rich websites linked to other similarly oriented organizations, activities that put students in touch with these groups have the potential to both inform and inspire.

HORROR INTO HOPE

I began my activism as a teenager protesting the war in Vietnam. The more I read, the more horrified I became at the atrocities committed by the U.S. government, and by the government's consistent lying about Vietnam, going back to the end of World War II. I first felt bitterness and anger - emotions that found expression in Bob Dylan's unforgiving song, "Masters of War," which I listened to over and over. But activism against the war led me to communities of other like-minded people. The people I came to know and work with - many of whom were members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War - were well aware of the horrors committed against the Vietnamese by the U.S. government. Yet, in the process of joining together in opposition to the war, and to seek its root causes, something else began to happen. We developed an affirmative vision of a cooperative, non-militaristic society - a vision nurtured by the way we worked and treated one another in anti-war communities. Horror and disgust at injustice can turn to hope when individuals of conscience find one another and begin to act on their common commitments.

The great Brazilian educator Paulo Freire once said that pedagogy needs to become more political and politics needs to become more pedagogical. Speaking as a teacher and as an activist, I can say that this has never been more true.

When we teach honestly about the frightening constellation of global forces that threatens the survival of whole cultures, of eco-systems, and of the very planet itself, we can't ignore the potential

impact that this may have on our students. Our pedagogy has to be more political: We need to invite students to consider alternatives - we need to invite them to become a part of making alternatives. How do students come to a deep awareness of global injustice without losing hope? Perhaps like Andrea Townsend, they need to experience the "thrill of solidarity." They need to recognize that they can make a difference, with others - and that engagement in the world can defeat cynicism.

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