

TAKING SIDES

At its heart this book is about choice. It examines how we can help ourselves and others understand that we do have choices, and then learn how to make defiant choices. I argue that we can do this by using rational discourse, nonrational discourse, and that magical mix of the rational and nonrational, the telling of stories. In this first part, I introduce the idea of teaching defiance. In the next part, I deal with themes which run through the rest of the book. These include rebelliousness, defiance, consciousness and choice. In the third part, I look at ways of using rational discourse to help people analyze, communicate and negotiate for personal and collective change. In the fourth part, I look at how we can use nonrational discourse to encourage insight, and to turn insight into action. And in the final part, I look at how we can use storytelling to help ourselves and others construct our own moralities, and so choose acts of defiance which we can justify.

Using Theory

As must already be obvious, this book is a polemic. I will put a case. I will take sides. I will argue that activist educators should teach people to make up their own minds and take control of their own lives. I will argue that we should teach ourselves and others to be defiant.

Of course, if I am adopting the style of a polemicist, I should tell you at the outset what makes me tick. So . . . I subscribe to the Marxist idea that we generate our consciousness in dialectical rela-

tionship with our social and material world. We make ourselves by living in and responding to a context. I like Anthony Giddens's claim (1991, 52, 53) that our self-identity is not given but "has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual."

I understand that we are utterly alone but that our existence as conscious beings depends on the company of others. We are trapped inside our own awareness and can only ever communicate imperfectly with the world outside. And yet it is through this imperfect communication that we construct our being. It is through this troubled, sensuous encounter between the self and the world (Allman, 2001) that we create, and then develop, the ways in which we feel and think.

I am an existentialist to the extent that I believe that we have choice. To say that we can do nothing even in the face of what appear to be insurmountable odds is to deny our humanity. I like Sartre's insistence (1984, 572–573) that we do not receive our goals "from outside" or from "a so-called inner nature." We can choose our "ultimate ends," give character to our being and make manifest our freedom.

I like Camus's idea of the absurd. There is nothing to believe in, no ultimate truth, no deity or set of absolute principles to give us direction, and yet we spend our lives behaving as if there were. We stand "face to face with the irrational" yet feel a "longing for happiness and reason" (Camus, 1975, 31–32). Absurd though it is, we will spend our lives striving to give purpose to a purposeless existence.

So I like the critical theorists' retreat from the idea of the enlightened rational being to the ideas of aesthetics and egalitarian communicative action (Rasmussen, 1996). Our search for some kind of meaning will be through an examination of values. And our search for that elusive purpose will be through talk.

And I like Habermas's tripartitions (Habermas, 1972; see also Dallmayr, 1996, 85–86). We exist simultaneously in objective, social and subjective worlds. We live according to the three value

spheres of science, ethics and self-expression. We construct our being through relationships which are subject-to-object, subject-to-subject and subject-to-self. And we grow by engaging in instrumental, interpretive and critical learning.

Faced with isolation, choice, absurdity, a loss of the rational and the challenges of living in multiple worlds, we need to learn and teach what in eighteenth-century English was described as “bottom.” Imperfectly translating this into twenty-first-century English, I believe we need to teach and learn a combination of feistiness, character, courage and perseverance.

Taking Control of Our Moment

I have said elsewhere (Newman, 1999) that I like watching professionals at work, be they a glass worker swabbing out molds with consummate physical grace, a rock guitarist playing a searing, silvery solo or a skilled and committed union educator delivering a course on workers’ and other human rights. Professionals, whether paid or not, know what they are doing. They make the right choices. They are in control of their moment.

“Freddie” Ayer was an English philosopher and I like him too, in good part because, at the age of seventy-seven and just two years before his death, he intervened to stop the then heavyweight boxing champion of the world from harassing a supermodel at a social event in New York (Rogers, 1999, 344). But I also like him for some of his philosophical ideas. Ayer (1971, 104–106) called himself “a logical empiricist” and argued that all “genuine propositions” other than tautologies draw their significance from the fact that they can be verified with reference to a “sense-experience.” As a start to this book, therefore, I want to look at two consummate professionals and their encounter with an intense and artificially heightened experience. I am not going to pretend to apply the kind of rigor to the process that Ayer would want, but as I write this book I will use practical example, anecdote and description of this kind to “verify”

some of the propositions I make. And I realize that for this first practical example I have chosen the game of cricket, and so I must ask those who are not familiar with cricket to imagine a tennis player on the receiving end of a series of massive serves, or a baseball batter stepping up to face an unforgiving pitcher or an exponent of karate facing a sustained and furious attack.

Matthew Hayden and Justin Langer are the opening batsmen for the Australian test cricket team. As I write, the Australian team is the best in the world, so Hayden and Langer are amongst the best batsmen in the world. Opening batsmen are a special breed. They walk out onto the field to face the fast bowlers of the other side. The bowlers are fresh and the ball is new, rock-hard and shiny. As the batsman on strike takes up his position, he faces the prospect, if he survives, of having the ball bowled at him for several hours at speeds of up to 150 kilometers per hour. The ball has a raised seam around it. It can curve in the air. As it hits the surface of the wicket, it can change direction. It can jag in towards the batsman or sheer away. It can skid through at groin level, or it can rear up towards the batsman's rib cage, heart or head. The batsman can respond in a number of ways. He can hook, pull, cut, drive, glance or block the ball, or let it go through to the keeper. From the moment the ball leaves the bowler's upstretched arm the batsman has a fraction of a second in which to judge how he will respond. The slightest mistake and he will snick a catch to the waiting fielders, or miss the ball and have it crash into his body or shatter the stumps behind him.

Television coverage of cricket is sophisticated, and sometimes in slow-motion replay the camera will zoom in on the batsman's gaze. When Hayden and Langer are on song, these close-ups are electric. They are close-ups of people under a fierce, ritualized attack. They are close-ups of people making lightning choices. They are close-ups of people who are intensely aware and utterly in the present. These are professionals in full control of their moment, and you can see a glorious, bloody-minded defiance in their eyes.

Facing Up to Our Futures

We have no control over our past. We can use it, interpret it, learn from it and even rewrite it but the fact of it mockingly remains. I am Australian and Australia was once officially racist. Our immigration policy was unashamedly referred to as “the White Australia policy.” There is no escaping this unsavory fact.

We have no guaranteed control over our future. We can try to influence it by learning, planning and taking action, but events happen which can divert the whole course of our lives. On September 11, 2001, passenger planes were flown into buildings in the cities of Washington and New York in the United States, killing everyone on board and thousands on the ground and changing the world.

Our pasts direct us forward, obvious futures rush back to meet us, and others wait unseen to waylay us, like footpads in a dark alley. All we have is the present, a moment in which we can choose, in which we can either give in to our pasts or face up to, deal with and defy some of our futures.

Making Up Our Own Minds

In Australia in the 1970s progressive political leaders broke free from our racist past and vigorously promoted multiculturalism. Migrants were accepted from all parts of the world. Legislation was introduced to redress previous systemic inequities and promote equal opportunities in employment. People became more tolerant of differences in sexual preference. Diversity was celebrated.

Some twenty years later and this momentum for tolerance and equity abated. Now difference was treated with suspicion. In the 1990s Australia introduced stringent border protection to prevent asylum seekers arriving on our shores, and began putting those people who did slip through the cordon into mandatory detention. The treatment of these refugees was harsh. The camps were inhospitable and prisonlike. Whole families including young children were

imprisoned for months and even years while their claims to refugee status were examined. Many of these refugees were from the Middle East, and many were Muslim.

In public pronouncements about the arrival of refugees, some of our political leaders obscured the differences between refugees and terrorists. Old prejudices were awakened and new prejudices fed. And, although the treatment of refugees was given wide coverage in the mass media and there were vigorous protests and demonstrations, the government clearly judged that a majority would support its actions against these frightened, desperate people, or that we would not care.

In Australia in 2003, as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia prepared to go to war in Iraq, opposition to the war grew. On a Sunday in February 2003 more than 250,000 people gathered in the center of Sydney in protest against the war. Similar protests took place across Australia, and yet the prime minister and his government ignored these calls and committed Australian servicemen and servicewomen to the war in both supporting and combat roles. Once the invasion of Iraq was under way, there were more demonstrations and marches, but the numbers were less. Again the government judged that a sufficient number of people would remain unconcerned.

There was a truculence in the tone and style of a number of our mass media commentators and columnists. They scoffed at people who disagreed with their viewpoints. They replaced careful argument and debate with ridicule.

Someone else's future was being laid out for us. Imaginative, alternative ideas were being ignored. Australia is a small country on the other side of the world. We did not have to invade Iraq. Instead of promoting the idea of war, our political leaders could have tried to prevent it. Drawing authority from the fact that they represented a successful multicultural country, they could have stepped onto the international stage and offered to broker encounters and discussions with a view to helping the various parties seek ways to ensure peace.

Drawing authority from Australia's long-standing relationship with the United States, our leaders could have tried to help the policy-makers in Washington understand why so many people resented their influence and actions in the world.

But our leaders took us to war, secure in the knowledge that a majority of the population would say either "There's nothing I can do" or "Who cares?" A hegemony of the Gramscian kind had been established: a majority of the population allowed a small number of our political figures to make up our minds for us.

Critical Thinking

It is common enough these days to hear people say that we should teach critical thinking, but this injunction has become a platitude. There was a time when critical thinking derived from critical theory. This kind of critical thinking involved separating out "truth" from "ideology." It meant analyzing human activity in terms of power and refusing to take the words, ideas, injunctions and orders of others at face value. It meant not letting others make up our minds for us. It meant abandoning the search for some fixed set of principles and adopting a stance of informed and continual critique. Critical thinking was not a neutral activity. Like the critical theory from which it sprang, critical thinking was associated with the pursuit of social justice.

But the term has been domesticated. In the 1970s and 1980s, as enrollments dropped in traditional university departments of philosophy, the teachers in those departments went looking for work and offered to teach critical thinking in other departments. Often what they taught was Aristotelian logic and its extensions in modern scientific reasoning. This may have been no bad thing but, away from their own philosophy departments and teaching trainee geologists, architects, doctors and engineers, these teachers were required to focus on logical process and were much less likely to encourage a condition of constant intellectual skepticism. "Critical

thinking” became a feature in educational publicity and a common objective or item of content in many curricula. But it was no longer critical thinking in the pursuit of social justice.

In 1980s and 1990s, teaching critical thinking became a feature of programs in human resource development and workplace learning, and the concept was reduced to a corporatist competency. Now critical thinking was to be found as just one in a list of higher-order competencies, capabilities or capacities, alongside others such as “the ability to work in a team” and “a desire to produce high quality products” (Gonczi, 1992, 4).

Instead of this domesticated kind of critical thinking, I propose that we teach people how to resist.

Stating a Mission

If I go looking for a mission for activist adult educators—those people who are committed to helping themselves and others live out their lives through their learning—then it will be this. Our job is to help people become truly conscious, understand the different worlds we live in, and develop a morality in the face of the evident amorality of our universe. It is to teach people how to make up their own minds, and how to take control of their moment. It is to teach choice. It is to help ourselves and others break free from our pasts, plan for the futures we want and resist the futures we do not want. Our job is to teach defiance.

Finding Examples

Adult educators working in different contexts already teach defiance. In an interpersonal communication workshop people learn how to listen and speak effectively, how to avoid and resolve misunderstandings, and also how to assert themselves. In a program for people who have left school early, young adults engage in a combination of leisure activities, work experience and instruction in job-seeking skills in order to confront and counter some of the effects

of their disadvantaged backgrounds. And in a trade union course in occupational health and safety, activist members learn the information and strategies needed to take on managers who otherwise might be tempted to cut corners on safety. Although not normally expressed in this way, the purpose in each of these adult education activities is to help people learn how to defy others who might be laying out unwanted futures for them.

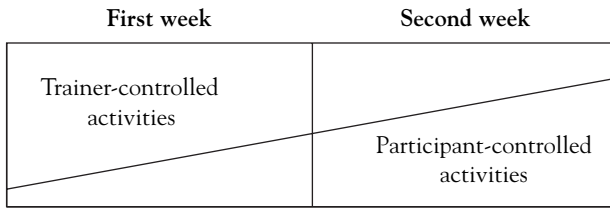
There are times when adult educators can seize the opportunity to teach defiance. I know of a middle-class woman who enrolled in a noncredit adult education course in silversmithing. She was in her sixties at the time and faced an unchallenging future dictated by her social class. She had joined the course as a diversion, but she quickly demonstrated an aptitude for working with silver and her tutor encouraged her. He suggested further, more serious study, and by the time the woman was in her seventies she was designing, making, exhibiting and selling silver jewelry. She had her own workshop at the back of her house, her own business and, for the first time in her life, her own career. Her silversmithing tutor had helped her turn that initial class of two hours a week into an act of defiance.

In the above examples, the teaching and learning of defiance, even when acknowledged, is secondary or incidental. In communication skills workshops, the aims often have more to do with boosting the participants' confidence in social and professional encounters, that is, they have to do with the participants' "personal growth." In the program for early school leavers the major aim is to get the participants into employment. In the occupational health and safety course, the aim is to make workplaces safer. And for the tutor and students in that silversmithing course, the aims were to teach and learn the basics of designing and making small pieces of silver jewelry.

In the mid-1980s I designed an educational course whose overt aim was to teach defiance. I was a trainer with the Australian Trade Union Training Authority (TUTA), a national organization with training centers in each state providing courses for members of

unions in organizing, negotiating workplace agreements, representing members and other trade union skills. Over several weeks I wrote the curriculum for a two-week course provisionally called "Powershift." The course was to be offered to experienced union activists and would help them develop the necessary skills and knowledge in order to challenge the authority of management in a workplace. Through the use of training sessions, case studies, and role-play, participants would devise ways of shifting some of the power to the shop floor so that workers could have a greater say in the ways their workplaces were organized and in how the profits from their work were distributed. The skills to be learned included analyzing problems, managing meetings, mobilizing a workplace, campaigning and negotiating agreements. There were to be information sessions on work organization, company finances, company structure, common and not so common company practice and the current state of Australian industry and the Australian economy. I set the role-plays within a scenario of a middle-sized Australian enterprise expanding into the Asian-Pacific market. The participants were to develop their campaigns around the introduction of new technologies and a management drive for increased productivity.

The course itself was based on a shift of power from the trainers to the participants. At the outset the trainers would be in control but as the course progressed the participants would gradually take over. In the first week the trainers and visiting experts would provide input sessions, and these would interrupt the scenario in order to inform the participants and allow them to take the scenario further. As the course entered the second week, the input sessions would be reduced in number and participants would spend an increasing amount of time in the scenario. What input sessions there were would be decided on by a course committee and provided by participants drawing upon their own resources and the center's information services. And in the last few days of the course, the scenario would dominate. On the final day subgroups would outline their findings and put their proposals to the trainers and the other

Figure 1

From Trade Union Training Australia Inc. (TUTA). Used by permission.

participants, as if they were committees reporting to a general meeting of workplace members. Figure 1 represents this shift of control.

The course never took place. TUTA underwent major restructuring itself. The director of my center, who had supported me in the writing of the course, moved on to another position in TUTA. And some months later I too moved on, to another organization altogether.

Now, a good number of years on and I am writing this book. In a way I am taking up where I left off, but my aim is to investigate how adult educators working in any context can make the teaching of defiance not secondary nor incidental nor just one of several aims, but central to our work.