



Book review:

Creative Universities: Reimagining Education for Global Challenges and Alternative Futures (2021)

Anke Schwittay; 200 pages; [Bristol University Press](#)

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1. Review

The book 'Creative Universities' by Anke Schwittay (2021) is unlike any other academic text I have read about teaching; the pages buzz with hope, creative vision and radical possibilities, and it left me wanting to do my teaching differently, to shake up our learning spaces, and to keep asking questions.

This book is a call to arms in which Schwittay invites us to have courage, take risks, cause disturbance, be creative, and alongside our students reshape the way we engage in education via a critical-creative pedagogy (hereafter C-CP). The words and ideas laid on the pages nudge us into reflections about our identity as academics, asking us difficult questions: how courageous can we be? What risks are we willing to take?

In the words of one of the author's students, '*university-taught brains are not geared towards*

creativity first and foremost' (p.44). Being creative teachers and academics requires us to change our traditional and established ways of working; to do so, means that we need to begin with our selves before we can encourage and guide our students to play, create, disrupt and question. Schwittay gently and generously offers us a roadmap towards this collaborative shift. In the author's words, her book is her own '*performative ontological project* of making hope and possibility more present, credible and viable in HE classrooms' (p.16).

A Professor in Anthropology and Global Development at the University of Sussex, Schwittay begins with an 'invitation' chapter, confessing that it took courage for her to write about her own teaching, something social scientists tend not to do. Shaped by her journey as an academic in anthropology and development / global studies, the text is richly imbued with her experiences of teaching and researching in diverse cultural contexts from Latin America to New Zealand. This journey includes a three-year period of

data collection with students – via journey interviews – and conversations with colleagues at Sussex University as well as in Bolivia.

Written during the pandemic in 2020, this book began with questions: from the postgraduate student who asked ‘whether there was any hope left for development’, to one of the student interviewees who felt ‘defeated’ knowing there were no direct solutions to ‘difficult issues’. The disillusionment she saw in her students is what drove Schwittay to ask her own questions such as: ‘what if my teaching could offer students openings where they could see only closure?’ (p.2). Schwittay’s answer is developed across the chapters of the book, framed by what she calls a critical-creative pedagogy (C-CP). Central to this approach is the goal of teaching students not only to deconstruct but also to rebuild (p.3). There is a wonderful visual representation of Schwittay’s C-CP called the ‘guiding star’ (p.3) illustrating the four interweaving strands associated with this pedagogy: *whole person learning* (experiential); *creative methods* from design and the arts; *problem-based praxis*; and *critical hope*.

The first chapter ends with a kind invitation to the reader ‘to make this book their own’ (p.22), to imagine how it could be useful in your own area of teaching – with questions such as ‘which key concepts do I want my students to learn about in a critical-creative way?’ It’s a shame that subsequent chapters did not offer similar reflective questions. Whilst the companion website offers a wealth of practical materials (see comments below), a series of prompts for reflection throughout the chapters might appeal to readers not engaged in critical pedagogy and praxis but who will undoubtedly be inspired to move in that direction after reading this hopeful book.

A useful table (p.21) gives us a summary of main chapter insights listing key terms / processes and how each chapter addresses a specific challenge explored in relation to *knowledge, orientations and politics*. For example, chapter 3 ‘Designing Futures’ presents *knowledge* about ‘wicked problems’ and design thinking, *orients* us to ambiguity, humility and empathy, and emphasises a *politics* of resource equalities.

The invitation is followed by a chapter offering insights into selected philosophies from the canon of critical pedagogy. Schwittay takes us on a conceptual journey from Paolo Freire to Arturo Escobar. Chapters 2 to 6 make up the essential material of the book; each of the chapters begin with a narrative, written in italics, offering a story to frame the subsequent text. For example, chapter 6 opens ‘*on a wintry day in February 2020*’ and describes a teach-out during the faculty strike at Sussex university. These informal openings lean into the personal and the ‘lived’ experiences of the author and her students in teaching spaces as well as other events such as the student walk-out of an economics class at Harvard University (p. 79).

Each chapter follows same format: the first part lays out theoretical ideas framing the context, with the second part describing aligned creative teaching activities. Each of these activities offer deep insight into the praxis of C-CP. Organised around social, ecological and economic challenges (and reflected in diverse modules taught at Sussex by Schwittay and her colleagues), students are guided to imagine different futures: critically creative activities include setting up a cooperative enterprise, body mapping, designing and creating built scenarios of alternative futures, designing and playing games, mapping alternative campus spaces, taking part in walking seminars, and developing an activist campaign. It is clear that these collaborative activities enable students to question established knowledge and paradigms through play, and to deconstruct any assumptions that they bring with them to university (particularly pertinent to the context of students coming to do Development studies, where assumptions are often shaped by saviourism - a desire to ‘save the world’ and help ‘poor people’ in the global south).

Descriptions of the activities are further enhanced by reflections and comments from students, highlighting the depth of learning which for one was seen to remove them ‘from the grips of theory’ (p.124).

Based on the author’s research of her own teaching practice at Sussex University, the ideas offered here do not propose to solve issues or problems, but are guided by a ‘working towards’ approach (p.13); this practice is,

in Schwittay's words, '*gradual, modest and meandering*' – a hopeful and refreshing alternative to the corporate model in our universities that emphasises output and leaves little room for colourful ambiguity.

This is not a 'how to' book about creative teaching practice; to a large extent I wish it was and on initial reading my one niggle with the book was the uncreative format and presentation. Such a rich text would have appealed to me more if the chapters had been designed with friendly user-access in mind – e.g., text boxes summarising the creative activities and, as mentioned earlier, reflection points for the reader, ideas and tips for practice. However, the discovery of the book's companion website has amply satisfied this wish; if you are looking for some detailed 'how to' tips, I highly recommend the website which in my view enhances and brings the praxis elements of the book alive.¹ Reflecting the collaborative spirit of the book, the website offers examples of teaching materials related to the activities described in the book, including activity guides, module handbooks, and related readings, as well as examples of student work and quotes. However, I think that these short summaries in relation to each teaching activity would also have worked well in the book. Mirroring the book, the activities are organised around social, ecological and economic alternatives. This generous offering more than makes up for what I consider a lack of 'creative pointers' in the book!

Schwittay's writing style is eloquent – every word matters. There are no frills. As a reader I found this a challenging and dense text, and in places I found myself skipping over some of the theoretical ideas to get to the stories of students engaged in creative learning.

In addition to her vast global experiences that have informed this book, the more recent and focused research for 'Creative Universities' comes from Schwittay's 30 'journey interviews' with her undergraduate students, as well as interviews with colleagues. Insights and comments from students add a wonderful layer to the text. Schwittay's diverse group of students respond to the challenges with enthusiasm, clearly fired up by the prospects of disrupting the norm

and stepping out of their comfort zones. One student engaged in climate activism (chapter 6) says that 'university is the perfect space to disrupt and partake in activism. It allows you to be radical' (p.150). Given the history of the University of Sussex as well as the prominence of green politics in Brighton, it is easy to see how this kind of activism is possible there. The radical teaching activities described in Schwittay's book are set against the backdrop of a university with a history of radical protest, and also within context of global and international development studies – courses that naturally lend themselves to disruptions and alternatives. Remembering Schwittay's invitation in chapter one, I kept wondering "how would this work in a School of Education and Childhood studies, where the majority of students are home/White?". I imagine that Schwittay's response would be "of course it can work; it just takes courage!".

Though I do wonder to what extent this courage might be influenced by the profile of students in our classes; in Schwittay's case she has the privilege of working with students from a wide range of countries, who also are committed to international development, as well as students already heavily involved in collective action such as Occupy and Extinction Rebellion, and the #Yosoy132 student protests in Mexico.

Taken together, these chapters do a thorough job of telling us about the conceptual and practical ideas framing a certain approach and then show us how creative activities can teach students how to transgress, question and formulate critical questions across disciplinary traditions and boundaries – this questioning is central to the C-CP. Such a pedagogy reflects Freirean ideas of 'epistemological curiosity' (Freire 1997), which he defined as a dynamic process experienced in the body rather than just the mind. The learning activities described by Schwittay clearly reflect this philosophy, such as engaging students in body-mapping (ch.2) to explore questions of power as well as personal feelings and positionality.

The author's ideas are strongly influenced by those of Gibson-Graham (2008) around performative

¹ <https://www.creativeuniversities.com/>

elements of academic practice, where spaces can be created for a “pedagogical politics of possibilities” (p.8). Putting a more positive spin on the idea of ‘weak theory’, Schwittay proposes what she calls ‘generative theory’ (p.8), which offers an experimental approach to global challenges. Every word laid down on the page by Schwittay contains depth, and I found myself returning again and again to phrases that transmit profound thinking and inspiration. For example, defining her generative theorizing, she writes: ‘it seeks *connections* and collaborations and is willing to *consider rather than judge*. It *embraces the unexpected, celebrates and surprises* and is interested in building up rather than tearing down. Generative theory enables a critical-creative pedagogy by ensuring that its critical component does not overwhelm its creative sibling, putting both on an equal footing where they can *nurture* each other.’ (p.9) (my emphasis). This is radical hope indeed, a vision for a university culture that can bring us together in curiosity that nurtures explorations, rather than compete for outputs and star ratings.

Part of the research for this book was done in Bolivia, and in the chapter ‘Repairing Ecologies’ Schwittay introduces the Latin American concept of ‘buen vivir’: rooted in indigenous belief systems that offer alternatives to Western worldviews, ‘buen vivir’ (literally ‘good living’) became part of government policy during the presidency of Morales, and led to radical initiatives such as the rights of Madre Tierra (mother earth). These broader insights and learnings from indigenous knowledge are what add depth to Schwittay’s book, and teach us true meanings of what it is to be and act as a global citizen.

As such this book reads like a manifesto and it leaves the reader enriched and inspired. We must always keep learning and shifting and be willing to change, and Schwittay’s book gives us the impetus and the scope for possibilities. Whatever our discipline in HE, we are all somehow involved in preparing students to play their part in the world beyond academia. We live in a troubled world, and Schwittay’s model of critical-creative pedagogy offers a hopeful roadmap for any educator concerned with social justice, or who just

seeks alternatives to working within the corporate driven machine of HE.

However, before we can create projects for our students we need to develop as critical creative educators. This involves far more than coloured paper and glue sticks: such an educator must be equipped with courage, confidence, commitment and energy. Above all, risk taking. A key point made by Schwittay is that all creative activities also need meticulous planning as well as clear guidance for students.

The penultimate chapter captures the essence of the biggest obstacle to C-CP: the corporate university machine. In a climate where employability is the *mot du jour* in HE, Schwittay argues that a pattern of ‘deliver and assess’ merely replicates Freire’s notion of ‘banking style’ education. In the context of global studies, critical-creative teaching leads students to question the shortcomings of their previous job aspirations – e.g., is working for an international NGO part of the problem? (p.132)

The concluding chapter *Capstones* responds to Freire’s call that ‘hope is not enough – we need critical hope’ (cited p.157), by offering examples of larger scale ‘utopian initiatives’ within the themes of *opening up learning, sustain-able campuses* and *reimagining universities*. Each of these projects build on and draw insights from all preceding chapters, but by posing deeper questions Schwittay offers these examples as ‘jumping-off points’ for us to imagine possibilities in our own disciplinary contexts.

I drafted this review on the day the Supreme Court in the US overturned *Roe vs Wade* (24.6.22). To say that these are times that call for radical hope is something of an understatement; as educators we have an ethical responsibility to imagine and enact alternative futures. Anke Schwittay clearly walks her talk (p.7): if we care about the real work of education in these troubled times, we would do well to follow in her footsteps.

2. Disclosure statement

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