

“For Credibility’s Sake Let’s Start with the Bad News”: A Pessimistic Pedagogy in the Age of Spectacle

Trent Davis
York University

Do you suffer from what a French paleontologist called “the distress that makes human wills founder daily under the crushing number of living things and stars”? For the world is as glorious as ever, and exalting, but for credibility’s sake let’s start with the bad news.

— Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being*

I am not sure if you have heard, but last year Apple released a new computer called the iPad. In the first thirty second television commercial, “What is iPad?” the narrator describes it as not just “thin” and “beautiful,” but “crazy powerful,” “a revolution,” and even “magical.” Apparently iPad can provide “more books than you could read in a lifetime.” Now philosophers of education are not exactly known for their technical savvy, and while I have no desire to make us even less popular than we currently are, I am willing to publicly admit that I do not want a “magical” and “crazy powerful” computer that holds more books than I could ever possibly read. Since the ad first aired last March Apple has removed it from its website since they subsequently released two more iPad commercials. If you missed the original there is no cause for worry — you can watch it at your leisure while browsing more videos than you could ever see in a lifetime on YouTube.

Of course, the often ridiculous language of advertising is not meant to be taken quite so seriously. But it is good to remember how a little more than forty years ago, Peter F. Drucker in *The Age of Discontinuity*, accurately predicted that the coming decades would bring dramatic and unprecedented technological change. Focused on how such developments would likely expand the global economy, Drucker questioned whether new democratic institutions would be created to help keep concentrated economic and political power in check. The last chapter of his book even has the gloomy title “Does Knowledge Have a Future?” It opens with the assertion that “The central *moral* problem of the knowledge society will be the responsibility of the learned.”¹ Drucker thus hoped that those with the intelligence and interest to follow developments and ask hard questions would address the potential excesses of what he prophetically called “the knowledge society.”

Drucker’s view of intellectual responsibility remains acutely relevant in a world characterized by “discontinuities” that have since intensified far beyond what he initially imagined. However, in *Knowledge Economy, Development and the Future of Higher Education*, Michael A. Peters points out that the scholarly discussion of the contemporary knowledge economy remains curiously underdeveloped. His recommendation is theory building, and he is emphatic that “what we desperately need, perhaps more than any other time in contemporary history, is theory — a big theory of the knowledge economy or global knowledge capitalism.”² While I doubt that a “big theory” would really be all that helpful, I find myself in agreement when he adds “It will be a theory peculiar to our interests as academics, as writers, and as

educators and it is curious that for a condition that engulfs us and determines our institutions and subjectivities that we should have so little to say about it.”³

This essay is an attempt to say something about one aspect of this “condition” called the knowledge economy. What I want to discuss is *illusion* — specifically the superficial and often deceptive images that the knowledge economy is spectacularly good at producing. What I have in mind here is the subject of Chris Hedges’s recent book *The Empire of Illusion*. Hedges argues that the images produced by our most popular media such as television, movies, and the internet have contributed to a culture of unreal “spectacle” that has in turn diminished our capacity as fellow citizens to address real, collective problems. Startling numbers of people, he alarmingly cites as evidence, regularly watch programming such as professional wrestling, so-called “reality” television, and pornography. Such “illusions,” of course, are not confined to the entertainment and advertising industries. As the recent sub-prime mortgage scandal reveals, illusions in the knowledge economy can be not just misleading, but really serious in their consequences.

The response to this problem that I argue for takes its cue from the Annie Dillard quote with which I opened this essay. She suggests that while the world is still worth loving, still “exalting,” that we ought to “begin with the bad news” since that is where “credibility” is found. I interpret “the bad news” here as referring to the limitations that we ought to realistically accept and face as we go about our lives. My interest in developing this idea, however, was fueled by a surprising source — Joshua Foa Dienstag’s *Pessimism*. Dienstag conceptualizes pessimism as a rich “philosophical sensibility,” and more mundanely as “a proposed stance from which to grapple with a world that we now recognize as disordered and disenchanting.”⁴ For my purposes, however, it is his further description of its primary goal as “teaching limitations” that I want to emphasize.⁵

In what follows, I proceed in three sections. In the first, “The Problem of Illusion,” I try to get a clearer understanding of illusion and why it is so pervasive in the contemporary knowledge economy. In the second, “The Case for Pessimism,” I discuss Dienstag’s view of pessimism and argue for its relevance based on its capacity to “teach limitations.” In the last section, “A Pessimistic Pedagogy,” I suggest some ways that pessimism can open new possibilities for extended thought in education, and share a few moments from my own “pessimistic” teaching while working in a teacher education program. My intention is that taken together the three sections will develop my argument that given the current illusions of the knowledge economy, what education needs right now is a heaping dose of a pessimism that can help teachers and students cultivate greater recognition of life’s real limitations.

THE PROBLEM OF ILLUSION

In his title Hedges sums up our situation as “The Triumph of Spectacle,” inferring that the producers of illusion have already won something that cannot be easily recovered. The five chapters in the book are all of the form “The Illusion of _____,” with “Literacy,” “Love,” “Wisdom,” “Happiness,” and “America” successively filling in the blank. Yet despite the differences in topic, all the chapters

describe the most popular forms of illusion and reveal how many people watch and listen to them. For example, in the chapter “The Illusion of Love” Hedges discusses the attention pornography receives. I was genuinely shocked by how much profit it generates and the number of people who view it. This was the pattern of my experience as I made my way through the book: Hedges would back up his claims with empirical evidence that would leave me feeling vaguely irritated. What concerned me the most was the convincing argument he makes in the last chapter where being “dragged back to realism” is our only serious option as a species if we wish to even survive into the next century.⁶ How did we get to this point? How can illusion be best understood?

What I soon discovered is that what makes illusion so hard to think about is that it has been quietly yet insidiously getting worse for decades. Twenty-five years ago, for example, in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman argued that George Orwell’s *1984* had not been as prophetic as Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. In the foreword Postman explains his reasoning by contrasting the preoccupations of the two writers:

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy.⁷

At the time he penned those lines Postman was talking about the media he knew best — television and movies. Given the technological advances since then, Postman’s claim that “This book is about the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell, was right” actually seems dated.⁸ We now know that Huxley was dead right about the extent to which, as Postman put it, we would indeed become “passive,” “drowned in a sea of irrelevance,” and surrounded on all sides by the “trivial.”

In the final chapter, “The Huxleyan Warning,” Postman charged that our culture was on its way to becoming “a burlesque,” and that “spiritual devastation is more likely to come from an enemy with a smiling face.”⁹ And yet, interestingly, Postman also claimed that the situation was not entirely hopeless, and he turns to education when he claims that “it is an acknowledged task of the schools to assist the young in learning how to interpret the symbols of their culture,” even insisting that that this should comprise “the center of education.”¹⁰

As astute as Postman was, there is an earlier book that does an even better job at discussing the growth of illusion in the growing knowledge economy. First published in 1961, Daniel J. Boorstin’s *The Image* is still relevant today. In the foreword to the first edition Boorstin describes the subject of the text as “our arts of self-deception, how we hide reality from ourselves.”¹¹ Ultimately our illusions are caused by a singular vice: “We want and we believe these illusions because we suffer from extravagant expectations.”¹²

But given technological developments since Boorstin first wrote the book, the organization of the chapters reveals something more complex — these “expectations” have been simultaneously extended and then misleadingly fulfilled as the technology itself became more sophisticated. When Boorstin talks about how “news gathering” became “news making,” the “hero” a “celebrity,” “ideals” shifted to “images,” and “traveling” became “tourism,” all of the latter illusions have become ever more believable, ever more “real,” because the technical ability to make them look and sound real has driven the change in expectation.

When Boorstin writes on the very last page that “The least and the most we can hope for is that each of us may penetrate the unknown jungle of images in which we live our daily lives,” he must and does sound perfectly modern in ways that previous generations could never have comprehended.¹³ This is what makes the illusions of the knowledge economy so hard to address. To grasp this point, we just need to recall that for philosophers “illusion” broadly construed has been a concern right from the dawn of Western philosophy in ancient Greece.

No less a figure than Plato, after all, opens “The Allegory of the Cave” in *The Republic* by having Socrates say “here is a parable to illustrate the degrees in which our nature may be enlightened or unenlightened.”¹⁴ After Socrates has laid out the key details, Glaucon interjects “It is a strange picture, and a strange sort of prisoners,” with Socrates reassuring him that they are indeed “like ourselves.”¹⁵ It is nonetheless hard for us today to appreciate just how “strange” Glaucon would have reacted to a contemporary reading of Plato’s most iconic allegory.

Imagine Socrates trying to explain to Glaucon that in the updated version the “prisoners” do not really need to be chained in their seats anymore since now they are either physically lined up outside the cave, or in vastly greater numbers staring at computer screens from a distance, paying a cover charge with their credit cards for access, all for the expressed purpose of enjoying the illusions displayed on the cave wall. Imagine his further confusion when he hears that the nameless strangers, who in the original version were walking back and forth on the parapet carrying objects that cast shadows, have been replaced by the best and brightest among us, paid large sums of money by powerful corporations to keep the “prisoners” distracted and entertained.

And here, I believe, is the nub of the problem of illusion in the knowledge economy. As information technology advances, so does our capacity to both produce and consume illusions that further increase our expectations. As these become more intensely “real” we continue to demand more and more of them. All the while we fail to realize that we are drifting further and further away from reality and closer and closer toward a consumption-based culture. Corporations in turn derive enormous financial benefit from stoking the very expectations they then exaggerate through further illusion. The sense of frustration and even futility that creeps into the work of Hedges, Postman, and Boorstin reveals just how powerful they perceived this process would become and how little faith they had that anyone could really do anything to change it.

THE CASE FOR PESSIMISM

If illusions in the knowledge economy are so pervasive and construct reality so believably, what is to be done? In Dienstag’s *Pessimism* the pessimistic “heroes” are Miguel de Cervantes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Giacomo Leopardi, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Albert Camus, Miguel de Unamuno, and E.M. Cioran. This is a truly eclectic mix of figures representing an imaginative intellectual tradition.

Dienstag says of his strategy in bringing them together in a single text: “While I could provide a series of portraits of each thinker, it will be more effective, and more likely to demonstrate their common endeavor, to proceed through a series of propositions that pessimists subscribe to in greater or lesser degrees.” He immediately continues, “These propositions, which to some extent build on one another, are, in their bluntest form, as follows: that time is a burden; that the course of history is in some sense ironic; that freedom and happiness are incompatible; and that human existence is absurd.”¹⁶ These propositions, although relatively simple to explain, are profound in their implications.

They start from an understanding of time as linear, or noncyclical. This makes time-consciousness a “burden” since a moment lost is lost forever. Following from this, it is then truly “ironic” that despite progress in some areas of life, whether personal or political, that new problems continue to emerge, and what was considered an unequivocal success always has a downside. This might not be so bad if happiness predictably increased with the expanding freedom acquired through greater knowledge, but this is a dead end too, since new understanding always feeds the emergence of new problems and conflicts. And to top it all off, the unbridgeable gap between the language we use to describe the world, and the world itself, leaves us floating in an “absurd” universe. Dienstag’s pessimistic framework thus starts with an insight about time, and then proceeds to connected propositions about history, happiness, and then, subjective existence itself. Admittedly, any one of these propositions on their own could be the subject of an in-depth historical and philosophical analysis, and a person could accept or reject some or all of them to varying degrees. But when I first encountered them, I was struck, to return to the opening quote from Dillard, by their power to communicate just how “bad” the “bad news” really is about being human.

Consider that although the pessimistic authors Dienstag draws on obviously differ on details, the only substantive disagreement among them is their recommendation about how to cope with this “pessimistic” situation:

there is a divide between those pessimists, like Schopenhauer, who suggest that the only reasonable response to these propositions is a kind of resignation, and those, like Nietzsche, who reject resignation in favor of a more life-affirming ethic of individualism and spontaneity.¹⁷

Of course, there is no necessity to definitively choose either “resignation” or “life-affirmation” since either may be appropriate at different moments given the right context. And even though Dienstag divides pessimism into “cultural,” “metaphysical,” and “existential” types, he also makes it abundantly clear that “Pessimism’s

goal is not to depress us, but to edify us about our condition and to fortify us for the life that lies ahead.”¹⁸ I submit that the four propositions taken together achieve a coherent and compelling view of limitation across a range of human experience, and that it is this quality that “edifies” and “fortifies” the pessimist, regardless of which camp they happen to belong.

In support of this key point, consider Roger Scruton’s very new book *The Uses of Pessimism*. Scruton opens it by declaring his intention to “show the place of pessimism in restoring balance and wisdom to the conduct of human affairs.”¹⁹ His approach to cultivating this “balance and wisdom” involves critiquing a series of “fallacies” that he argues occupy central positions in our cultural lives. In each chapter a specific fallacy is carefully examined and a more sober view is preferred. Although for Dienstag pessimism “teaches limitations,” and for Scruton it provokes a critique of “fallacies,” for both philosophers pessimism functions as a much needed corrective that highlights human limitations and thereby provides a more realistic point of departure for grappling with serious problems.

A PESSIMISTIC PEDAGOGY

Finding ways to connect pessimism more closely to the philosophy of education is not easy. So much of educational thought is explicitly committed to the good that schools and education can bring to the world. For example, in *Happiness and Education* Nel Noddings claims, “Happiness should be an aim of education, and a good education should contribute significantly to personal and collective happiness.”²⁰ As much as I admire Noddings, I quickly realized it was unlikely that her text was going to be of much further help to me. As strange as it may seem, I wish her book had been called *Unhappiness and Education*.

Getting more specific regarding what exactly pessimists would do with their starting point of limitation in the context of education is difficult since the fine details of each pessimist’s approach differ. It should also come as no surprise that in the knowledge economy pessimism is too hastily viewed as a dispiriting philosophy that discourages rather than helps with the task of living. Those caveats aside, there are concrete descriptions worth taking seriously.

For example, Paul Smeyers, Richard Smith, and Paul Standish argue in their book *The Therapy of Education*, that there are good reasons to appreciate how throughout its history philosophy has been conceived as an indispensable aid to what the authors appropriately call “working on oneself.”²¹ I was particularly interested in Part II of the text, entitled “*Coming to Terms*.” In the introduction to the book as a whole the authors explain:

In speaking of ‘coming to terms’ we have in mind the ways in which the finitude of our lives, spatial and temporal, governs our condition: that we are subject to chance and contingency, and live in an uncertain world. We are interested in the ways in which we can learn to live well, finding happiness of a kind, within these limits.²²

Although certainly not a full-blown pessimistic stance, the idea of “coming to terms” nonetheless has certain pessimistic overtones. The reference to “finitude,” for example, lines up nicely with Dienstag’s first pessimistic proposition regarding the linear nature of time. Being vulnerable to “chance and contingency” can be seen as

a pessimistic theme, as can “uncertainty.” The task of “learning to live well, finding happiness of a kind” could be seen as pessimistic, and of course the emphasis on “limits” is the very core of pessimism as a philosophy.

To end on a somewhat more personal, appropriately pessimistic note, and to give a sense of what “teaching limitations” looks like in my own lived practice, for years I went into schools and watched teacher candidates teach. They were always holding an over-stuffed curriculum in one hand, and a long list of over-inflated “professional” expectations in the other, and I noticed that they often possessed the most extraordinary expectations about the potential of education. Their heads were also full of a truly odd assemblage of ideas. For example, Howard Gardner’s “multiple intelligences,” which seemed to grow more numerous every couple of years, with accompanying texts and packages available for purchase. Or take “Brain-based research,” the entire thrust of which seemed to be some variation of the banal point that students learn best when working together. Speaking of so-called “co-operative learning,” I was never sure how I was supposed to feel about an approach called “Tribes.”

When I finally stopped going into schools, I took with me the realization that in my academic courses I could create a place for teacher candidates to think together about the limits of teaching and learning. Having a Bachelor’s of Education degree myself, and knowing how terribly exhausting and disorienting teacher training can be, I started deliberately sharing my own teaching experiences. But rather than offering up my successes, I “started with the bad news” by admitting how scared I was when I started practice teaching, and how I often wanted to quit. I truthfully told them that I called my educational journal at the time “On Being Intimate with Failure,” and how very many mistakes I made. I started sharing my stories about substitute teaching after I had graduated from teacher’s college, and how it was generally a recipe for disaster.

My students over the last several years have enthusiastically responded to my increasingly “pessimistic” approach. In my classes they have generally become comfortable sharing teaching setbacks and even personal fears. Sometimes they even express how exasperated they have become with the demands placed on them, and how little resources and help they receive in schools. Some of them even admit that teaching in today’s classrooms is not what they thought it would be. Rather than a thrilling atmosphere of student learning where they would help their students fall in love with their own teachable specialty, they find themselves deluged with paperwork, frantically organizing complicated unit plans, and managing social problems.

And yet I also share with them that I have faith in education, and also in them as people, not just teachers. I tell them that I want them to stay in schools, but the road there is not just paved with more lesson plans and rubrics, but a greater openness and honesty about how they think and feel. Given the illusions all around us that are supported by enormously powerful interests, pessimism can help us see real limitations, and keep reminding us all that a part of living well involves bearing the real thoughts and feelings of both teachers and students.

-
1. Peter F. Drucker, *The Age of Discontinuity: Guidelines to Our Changing Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 372 (original emphasis).
 2. Michael A. Peters, *Knowledge Economy, Development and the Future of Higher Education* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2007), 27–28.
 3. *Ibid.*, 28.
 4. Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), xi.
 5. *Ibid.*, 41.
 6. Chris Hedges, *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2009), 190.
 7. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985), vii.
 8. *Ibid.*, viii.
 9. *Ibid.*, 155.
 10. *Ibid.*, 163.
 11. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Vintage, 1992), ix.
 12. *Ibid.*
 13. *Ibid.*, 261.
 14. Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Francis MacDonald Cornford (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), 227.
 15. *Ibid.*, 228.
 16. Dienstag, *Pessimism*, 19.
 17. *Ibid.*
 18. *Ibid.*
 19. *Ibid.*, xi.
 20. Roger Scruton, *The Uses of Pessimism: And the Danger of False Hope* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1.
 21. Nel Noddings, *Happiness and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.
 22. Paul Smeyers, Richard Smith, and Paul Standish, *The Therapy of Education: Philosophy, Happiness, and Personal Growth* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 5.