



Dystopia & Education: Insights into Theory, Praxis, and Policy in an Age of Utopia-Gone-Wrong

By Jessica A. Heybach and Eric C. Sheffield (Eds.)

Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing (2013). 298 pp., \$39.09

Reviewed by Courtney Smith-Nelson, Missouri State University

Abstract

*Jessica A Heybach and Eric C. Sheffield's **Dystopia & Education** is a collection of essays that examine the plight of modern-day public education through the lens of dystopian themes in literature, movies, and other media. The essays converge on one overarching theme: American schooling in the 21st century—and the young people being subjected to it—is in trouble, trouble which has been predicted or mirrored to a disturbing degree of accuracy in dystopian works of the last two centuries. This review dissects the book section by section and discusses its implications for the current generation of “dystopian youth” students.*

Keywords: *Book review, Dystopian themes, Educational philosophy, Educational reform, Dystopia and school, Dystopian youth*

It is an arguable truth that pop culture historically has been overlooked in academia. For better or worse, the ideas, perspectives, and memes of mainstream America have been, until relatively recently, relegated to a separate sphere from “high” culture—ivory tower literature, philosophy, and the like. From the founding of the Popular Culture Association in the 1970s to the ever-growing *Pop Culture and Philosophy* book series, the scholarly critique of popular culture and its reflection of/on society has become a more widely accepted (or at the very least, more widely published) field of study. In that vein, Heybach and Sheffield's *Dystopia & Education* is a collection of essays that examines the plight of modern-day public education through the lens of dystopian themes in literature, movies, and video games. The authors of these essays come from a wide range of backgrounds, but converge on one overarching theme: American schooling and education in the 21st century—and the young people being subjected to it—are in trouble, trouble which has been predicted or mirrored to a disturbing degree of accuracy in dystopian works of the last two centuries.

Dystopia & Education is broken up into the three sections listed in its subtitle: theory, praxis, and policy, with the editors' acknowledgment that any one cannot be separated from the others entirely; to that end, many of the works present address a combination of the three themes. Whether intentionally or not, these sections also appear in ascending order of readability and accessibility for the layperson whose expertise may not include the philosophy of education.

With that in mind, I will discuss each section in the same order in which I ultimately chose to read them, from back to front.

One can optimistically assume that any individual teacher or school would have a reasonable idea of what works and does not work for students—that is, what is helpful versus harmful in education. It is when schools are dictated to by some indirectly involved “other,” such as government officials whose expertise lies primarily in winning elections, that the ideals of education are warped into something counterproductive and ultimately oppressive. “Policy,” the final section of *Dystopia and Education* is, presumably, from whence the first inkling of the idea for a dystopian analysis of education came; after all, the classic literary dystopian universes—*1984*, *Brave New World*, *The Handmaid's Tale*—are all defined by the total control (explicit or implicit) of the populace by an oppressive governmental regime. What's more, it makes sense that an “education as dystopia” view would initially stem from governmental policy, when the role of government is to (ostensibly) make life better for its constituents. Dystopia in its original sense, and in the sense used by the editors and authors of *Dystopia and Education*, is the result of a utopian ideal gone awry: the handmaids are oppressed and controlled for their own safety; the totalitarian regime in *V for Vendetta* supposedly guarantees the United Kingdom a nation without the threat of terrorism, since any possible threat (read: religious or social minority) is strictly forbidden and carefully monitored.

In that vein, *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* ensure that no student will fall prey to the variability and imperfection of an individual teacher's opinions or experiences by standardizing all curriculum, lessons, and policies under the assumption that every child in America will eventually go to college. The reality of this utopian vision for education is that students are taught to meet the arbitrary standards of multiple choice tests, teachers are stripped away of any freedom in the classroom—including the use of non-scripted, unscheduled “teachable moments”—so that more and more students ultimately get left behind because of a one-size-fits-all approach to education. Such are the arguments in *Dystopia and Education*. Several authors in this volume point to a flawed underlying philosophy of these policies; according to the government that created them, the purpose of education is to provide economic security to the nation and to maintain a competitive edge with other nations where the measure of success is in dollars. This end is not met by producing a generation of young people who can think critically and have a holistic understanding of education as a means to a fulfilling life, but by those who can make money, pay taxes, and consume. While each essay in this section had its own take on the state of education in America, the parallels drawn between Victor Frankenstein, the ideals of the Enlightenment, and modern-day schooling in Bradley D. Rowe and Taylor Lacy Klassman's “An Educational Dystopia: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and *Race to the Top*” was exceptionally spot-on. Frankenstein thought of himself as the perfect scientist, but his training was so narrowly oriented that he had no emotional or ethical connection to what he was doing. Similarly, the authors argue, as emotion, interest, and holistic educational practices are discarded for the standardized rote skills training that is becoming education, schools are becoming stunted, inept, and ultimately detrimental to its students.

Policy does effect—or more accurately, prescribe—the practices of the school systems that must follow those policies. So follows the second section of *Dystopia and Education*, wherein the praxis found within schools as a direct result of dystopian policies is examined via *The Giver*, *The Hunger Games*, and *A Clockwork Orange*, among other works. One particular theme occurring throughout the whole text is the comparison of schools, both in physical appearance and in practice, to prisons (multiple security checkpoints, required identification on

one's person at all times, strict monitoring and micromanaging of day-to-day activities and schedules, and constant surveillance, for starters). One reason given for these parallels is the rationale of “dystopian love,” also referred to as sadistic love. Schools just want the best for their students, but being children, they will inevitably make poor choices if left to their own devices. Dystopian love, then, saves the students from themselves—if the freedom to make poor choices is taken away, and measures put in place to make sure that freedom remains out of reach, then the students are forced to make what they are told are the “good” choices. The Hunger Games are held every year to remind the citizens of Panem what happens when the people make “bad” choices—in this particular case, the choice to rebel against the government, as discussed in Becky L. Noel Smith’s “‘Unlearning’ With the Dystopian Youth: Sating Student Hunger with the *Hunger Games*.” However, the notion of dystopian love is explained most clearly in *Dystopia & Education* editor Eric C. Sheffield’s “Dystopian Love Manifested in Dystopian Aesthetic: Insights into Contemporary Educational Practice from *A Clockwork Orange*,” which dissects the parallels between current educational practices and Anthony Burgess’s novel in which the protagonist Alex is forced through behavioral recalibration to physically loath violence; a noble idea perhaps, but in the process his love of classical music is ripped away as well. The arts are a casualty in Alex’s “rehabilitation,” but he no longer has the choice to perform the acts of violence that he once loved (for a while, anyway).

Prison-like schools similarly try to recalibrate students to be more productive citizens, in the strictest economic sense of the word. As mentioned before, when the primary underlying philosophy of education is to produce a wealthy and comfortable economy, then the best consumer—I mean *student*—is a compliant one. Those who rebel against the system are in one way or another forced out and used as reminders to the others of the consequences of rebellion, without much thought to why the system is working to disengage so many students, or what can be done to remedy it. This particular point is discussed in the dissection of the *Truancy* series in Joshua Garrison and Leslee Grey’s “Dystopia, Disciplinarity, and Governmentality: A Foucauldian Analysis of the Novels of Isamu Fukui.” Teachers, especially young ones, reading *Dystopia & Education* may find some of the arguments in the “Praxis” section ringing eerily true; we see the makings of a generation of dystopian youth every day. What can be even more alarming is that inevitably the young educator who reads *Dystopia & Education* may find themselves asking: was I, too, a member of the dystopian youth? In a nation where public education promotes the systematic oppression of its youth through compliance, did my desire to become a teacher mark me as the most compliant?

The final section of *Dystopia and Education* (although the first to appear in the book) is the collection of essays discussing educational theory and its parallels to dystopian universes. While each author had a compelling argument in his or her own way, such as the unfortunate connection between aesthetic of horror and low-income school districts, the most powerful and relevant statement of the “Theory” section can be found in Benjamin Baez’s “Merit, Democracy, Governing”: in the education system as it functions today, students are often dis-empowered, marginalized, and subjugated in the most oppressive ways because “society had to be deemed knowable via statistical analysis.” It has come to pass that the success or failure of education is to be determined entirely through that which can be measured, and if some aspect of learning is not completely quantifiable and, therefore, label-able, then it is either forced into something that it is not for the sake of measurement or disregarded completely as unimportant or worse, nonexistent (this is, perhaps, another oblique commentary on the dystopianization of Enlightenment ideals as well—the notion that if a thing cannot be scientifically studied or analyzed, then it must not

exist). This thought is a nice one, from a Utopian standpoint; if every student and every school is knowable to such a minute degree as to be able to successfully address every educational need, then the system will ultimately serve its students better through this intense process of knowing and measuring. The dystopian reality of the matter, Baez argues, is that this intense measurement denies students any development of selfhood, and instead replaces it with an assembly-line, cookie-cutter education that is delivered not unto individual humans, but walking, talking ID numbers with color-coded background statistics, and the result of said education is a stamp of their worthiness as a human being according to the laws of the Standardized Test.

This is where *Dystopia and Education* begins to fall short on its analysis of the state of modern education; there are so many acute, painfully precise insights into what has become of schooling in the twenty-first century, but there were fewer reasons provided as to *why* it has become so. Most essays blame the government (again, an easy feat to do when so much of what makes a dystopia what it is occurs through oppressive government control). Baez's essay comes close, as do several others, to approaching one particular underlying theme that is only directly mentioned in the text a handful of times. In its quest to minutely control for and improve every aspect of education, government officials turned to molding schools, educational policy, and, therefore, practice, into something that is measurable and readily available for statistical analysis. It was decided that standardized testing is the means to do this, and thus was born the multi-billion dollar industry of psychometrics (not that it did not exist prior to NCLB, just not in its ultra-profitable and influential state that it does now). The incredibly costly—and profitable—process of producing, vetting, implementation, and grading of standardized tests gave rise to the idea of education as an industry, rather than a means of producing well-rounded, healthy human beings. The industrialization of education, it can be argued, has influenced the spread of dystopian realities in American schools. Few essays in *Dystopia & Education* explicitly mention the connection, although its tendrils can be found subtly woven throughout most of the text's works.

In sum, *Dystopia & Education* delivers a bleak but unsurprising view of education, one that speaks very directly to the sensibilities of the public school teacher. The editors of *Dystopia & Education* plan to continue their work of providing a comprehensive theory of dystopian education, which has the potential to radically alter the way educators see themselves and their practices. Popular culture, even that which is directed toward children, has adopted dystopia almost as the default vision of any future. The bright, mod depictions of the future from previous generations—think of *The Jetsons*—eventually gave way to more bleak outlooks (you know things are bad when Disney, the happiest corporation on Earth, produces a dystopian parable like *WALL – E*, and it is lauded by critics as one of the best animated films in years). After reading *Dystopia & Education*, it is clear that this shift in popular culture is not without reason; but if there is one way to change this hopeless vision of the future, it is through education. Schools are the next frontier of dystopian wasteland, but with a comprehensive philosophy of dystopian education, perhaps Heybach and Sheffield will be the catalysts of change that will instill the next generation of dystopian youth with the antithesis of dystopia, that which is ever-increasingly lacking in public schools—hope.

Courtney Smith-Nelson teaches mathematics in the International Baccalaureate Programme at Central High School in Springfield, Missouri. She is currently working on her Master of Science of Secondary Education in Mathematics.