

Shweta Sheel

Theory and Methods for Public Pedagogy Research, Karen Charman and Mary Dixon, Routledge, 2021, 164 pp., INR 3,778.

The field of public pedagogy is relatively new, as the term “pedagogy” is most popularly used within the formal contexts of institutional learning, classroom environment, curricula, and textbook and teacher-driven interactions. Going beyond the strictly defined contexts of teaching and learning, the concept of public pedagogy allows us to understand these processes in subtle ways and through diverse modes. A growing body of research in recent years has focused on the interactions between diverse agencies and institutions, including family, media, and communities, that play the role of a pedagogue.

In this context, the book *Theory and Methods for Public Pedagogy Research* by Karen Charman and Mary Dixon is both timely and useful. The book is an important development especially for researchers working in this area as it helps to conceptualise, explore, and broaden the ideas of the public, authority, power, space, the role and identity of a researcher, and communicative processes. The term “public” requires an explanation within the concept of “public pedagogy”, as it is understood to be a part of the larger sphere that includes people, institutions, culture, and norms. As a prefix, the term “public” helps expand the scope of pedagogy from the classroom to the outside.

The broadness of the contexts in which the terms “educative agent” and “learning” has been used makes it harder to provide a single, definite process leading to the pedagogical process. The book under consideration discusses these limitations in the field of public pedagogy research. According to the authors, there has been a limited understanding of the individual’s interactions in different settings of research in this area. These individual interactions, when taken into consideration, allow for a better understanding of the pedagogical process.

Organised into six chapters, the book opens up relevant questions raised by authority, equality, access, and power. To Charman and Dixon, the idea of “public” is often understood

as a term giving the illusion of equality, as if all the people present in a space represent a homogenous set of groups. However, the understanding of “public” in a given space is defined by different genders, races, classes, and cultures.

Hannah Arendt (1958, 2006), Michel Foucault (2010), and Nancy Luxon (2013) are important figures to understand the ideas of public, power, authority, and space. The first part of the book provides the conceptual understanding of public pedagogy drawing from these works. The idea of public sphere is discussed by the authors to highlight the ideas of “public” and “space”. Similarly, “public sphere” as discussed by Habermas focuses on the co-construction of shared discourses allowed by a space. This book theorises the idea of public pedagogy based on these scholars to understand how spaces allow the processes of knowledge formation and dissemination, and regulation of agency and communication. The process of knowledge formation, communication, and dissemination are affected by the physical and demographic space. These processes, as discussed in the book, are not unilateral and definitive. Instead, the book successfully highlights the nuances of understanding how knowledge formation and communication are affected, regulated, and facilitated by the different spaces.

Spaces constituted by different demographical and physical constitutions are governed by power, authority, and hegemonic agencies. The text has significantly engaged with the works by Arendt to understand agency, power, and the public realm. It highlights the idea of parrhesia as discussed by Foucault (2010), as it helps to understand the capacity to speak in a regulated space bound by power. It also considers the idea of authority from the ideas of Luxon (2013) and her idea to rethink authority as the “relationship with the self, with the other and to truth telling” (p. 3). These works are sufficiently discussed in the book to understand the public realm and pedagogy as regulated by who can speak, and the determinants of the authority. It brings back questions such as, who gets to express, who controls the narratives, and what is considered relevant knowledge.

The later sections of this book focus on four new methods: organisation, performance, curation, and researcher. Departing from our traditional understanding of methods in research as means of deriving data and inferences, the authors propose an understanding of these methods as a means to understand the educative agent and process. This new approach provides possibilities to explore different communicative processes. It may be hard to

consider these as means to define methods in every context. The book provides explanations of how processes of meaning making, discussions, and regulation of power are facilitated by these methods.

These sections in the book further build the idea of a “public of different kinds” through understanding of the intention and will of a person. The authors discuss how they set up the Institute of Public Pedagogy and developed the performance of a Pop-Up School through which the discussion of different community members, workers, artists, and researchers was made possible. The organisation and performance of the Pop-Up school is described as a method to institute and facilitate space for public pedagogy and understanding what constitutes the public in a space. The performance of a Pop-Up School is seen as a method, as it was a means to “generate public representation of local community knowledge” (p. 10) across different communities across Melbourne. It facilitated the engagement of the community members in the process of knowledge formation, making them an educative agent, and hence, part of the pedagogical process. The organisation of an exhibition and public performance was explored to understand the idea of an audience and the pedagogical process.

The explanation of the last two methods offers new insights into power and agency. The sections towards the end of the book emphasise how the pursuit of knowledge leads to the collapse of formal and pre-existing institutional structures through the works of the researcher and students. The researcher as the method provokes new knowledge and becomes an educative agent. The engagement of students with work available in museums becomes a space for informal learning and collapses formal and preexisting institutional structures as sole determinants of knowledge and knowledge representations.

The book emphasises that “public pedagogy as a term and field signals that education and learning can occur anywhere” (p. 15). This claim broadens the idea of learning. It gives a sense to the meanings learned as result of the experience in and outside the traditional institutional. What differentiates public pedagogy from any formal education system is the aspect of “expectation” or the “learning outcome” of education. Both the formal education system and public pedagogy (message and the content) have aspects of a learning outcome. What is missing in public pedagogy is the legitimatisation of knowledge and meaning making, the concept of learning the right kind of behaviour, accountability to the system, and

the need for approval of the teacher and the authorities. The concept of meaning-making by individuals is understood as subjective as every individual perceives, understands, and conceptualises what is being presented according to their previous experiences and cognition.

The book describes that what differentiates public pedagogy from pedagogy in the formal system is its publicness. “Publicness” may be defined by the aspect of the demographic concept of population, the spatiality of the knowledge system, or through the binary of formality and informality of educational spaces. The formal education system defines learning only as regulated by formal educational institutions. Public pedagogy, however, looks at learning as a result of the interaction of people with different subjectivities in spaces inside and outside of formal educational institutions and classrooms. One’s understanding of learning and knowledge is subjective and changes across different contexts, spaces, and time.

The authors clarify that the ideas surrounding public pedagogy are distinct from that of critical pedagogy. While critical pedagogy intends to expand the possibility of critique and encourages social reconstruction in order to work for social justice (p. 16), public pedagogy does not have such a deterministic goal. Like any public process, it may include a mixture of street culture and elite culture, conservative and liberatory values. This mixture of cultures and spaces allows for a process of subjective meaning-making for the individual. The intention of the educative agent within the concept of public pedagogy may not be aimed at social reconstruction.

The methods described in this book are a result of the post-intervention or post-event reflections on the idea of public pedagogy. Researchers who are expecting methods in terms of means of data collection may be disappointed, as the book does not provide analytical structures to analyse public pedagogy or its advances. These methods are reflections on how spaces, processes, and different agencies may be understood as pedagogical agents. Despite these limitations, the book provides an insightful discussion on the nature of public pedagogy and the educative agent.

References

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