That'll Teach You: A Humanistic Reconstructionist Approach to the Project-Based Educations of the Companions of *Doctor Who*

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Abstract:

From the early 1900s through the 1950s, child-centered and humanistic theories of education were developed and disseminated from hubs of progressive educational theorization. Based on the resultant educational reforms of the 1960s, humanistic approaches to education became popular in schools throughout the United States. Concurrently, and perhaps not coincidentally, while these theories were being developed, *Doctor Who* was conceived and promoted as an educational television series for young learners throughout Britain. This essay posits that, consciously or inadvertently experimenting with progressive new pedagogical models, the Doctor and his series of companions present a complementary union of potentially opposing pedagogical approaches. While the Doctor's lessons tend to be pedantic in nature and substance, the companions' efforts to absorb the Doctor's demonstrated teachings, relating that message to the audience, make episodes humanistic learning experiences for the viewer. By presenting dilemmas confronted and varyingly resolved by companions of the Doctors show-run by Russell Davies and Steven Moffat, this essay illustrates each companion's personal struggles and attempts to understand and assimilate the Doctor's lessons into an expanding worldview or moral truth that parallels and elicits the viewer's—who occupies the silent, observant position of novice companion, or neophyte as acolyte—empathetically vicarious experiences.

Keywords: education, science fiction, television, *Doctor Who*, Montessori, Freire, project-based, learning, humanistic, reconstructionist

From the early 1900s through the 1950s, child-centered and humanistic theories of education were being developed and disseminated from the University of Chicago, Teachers College and Columbia University, hubs of progressive educational theorization. Based on the resultant educational reforms of the 1960s, humanistic approaches to education became popular in schools throughout the United States. Concurrently, and perhaps not coincidentally, while these theories were being developed, *Doctor Who* was being conceived and promoted as an educational television series for young learners throughout Britain. This essay posits that, consciously or inadvertently experimenting with progressive new pedagogical models, the Doctor

and his series of companions have continuously presented a complementary union of potentially opposing pedagogical approaches. Further, this essay demonstrates that, while the Doctor's lessons tends to be pedantic in nature and substance, the companions' efforts to absorb the Doctor's demonstrated teachings and relate his overall message to the audience make each episode a humanistic learning experience for the viewer. By presenting dilemmas confronted and varyingly resolved by companions of the Doctors show-run by Russell Davies and Steven Moffat, this essay illustrates an example of each companion's personal struggles in their attempts to understand and to assimilate the Doctor's lessons into an expanding worldview or moral truth that parallels and elicits in the viewer—who occupies the silent, observant position of the novice companion, or neophyte as acolyte—empathetically vicarious experiences.

Carl Rogers, in his analyses of humanistic psychology and education, helps to shift classroom styles from a focus on the subject to a focus on the student and on each student's own unique relationship with the subject. For a well-known example, Maria Montessori's pedagogical practices are firmly humanistic. As is the case with progressive educational theories, Reconstructionism supports the development of students' knowledge through and according to their relationships with their environments. Through a series of attempts, students learn what is successful or harmful, what is good for the student and what is good for others. Because this Reconstructionist pedagogical goal is student-oriented, the educator must be ready to direct and advise, but not to dictate.

Child- and community-centered humanistic education such as that expounded by Montessori, Paolo Freire and Carol Tomlinson would argue that learning is never completed by rote parroting of facts and formulas but must be developed into something "bigger-on-the-inside," such as a comprehensive worldview with application to real-world problems. The Doctor's lessons become exponentially more difficult as each learner-as-companion grows beyond the struggle for abstract comprehension of the Doctor's otherworldly lesson and takes responsibility for the use of his or her newly acquired knowledge.

Effective teaching links the student's internal experiences with the larger world. Each Doctor has, in his or her own way, engaged in extensive dialogue in the sense of explaining the companions' lessons to the companions; in addition, however, the Doctor's incarnations have generally given companions an opportunity to engage in dialogue with to process and understand the nuances and overarching messages in their experiences. Strikingly, the Doctor engages in the pedagogically revolutionary practice of teaching through dialogue as espoused by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. "Authentic reflection considers," Freire postulates, "people in relations to the world" because "consciousness and the world are simultaneous: consciousness neither precedes the world nor follows it" (1968, 81). This reciprocity of communication provides the opportunity for the companions, who are concurrently the Doctors' students, to dedicate themselves fully to immersion in their learning experiences and to living out the reality of their potentially abstract lessons. In imparting to the companions "education as the practice of freedom" which "denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world,"

it falls upon each Doctor to create a dialogue that links them and the viewer to every aspect of the universe they travel. This is also known as project-based learning, a method of instruction "opposed to education as the practice of domination" (Freire 1968, 81). According to Thom Markham, project-based learning "refocuses education on the student, not the curriculum" because the global world "rewards intangible assets such as drive, passion, creativity, empathy, and resiliency," individualized strengths that "must be activated through experience" (2011, 38). According to Markham, the point of such instruction is to make taught material relevant in an educational environment that "denies that the world exists as a reality apart from the people" (Freire 1968, 81). The learner must take the lesson and apply it to real issues, finding solutions that are socially and personally meaningful.

Each Doctor's assignment of problems through a dialogic teaching style gives the companions access to a universe of engaging subjects. Freire presents the notions of dialogic teaching, anti-subjugation social identity and the cultivation of a social appetite for knowledge, theorizing from experience. Freire's message is clear to those whose lives have somehow led them to share similar experiences of disempowerment, subjugation or helplessness. From the First Doctor's goal-oriented and confident granddaughter through the Fourth Doctor's various travel mates, possibly the most companions assigned to a single Doctor, to the newest Doctors' highly relatable friends and companions, the companions' experiences transform them completely, toppling outdated hierarchical power structures even as they are forced to function within them. "In slave societies," Ira Berlin reminds students of American history in the Whovian-ly eye-opening lessons of *Many Thousands Gone,* "slavery stood at the center of economic production, and the master-slave relationship provided the model for all social relations" (1998, 8). The predominant status of chattel slavery as a society's preeminent form of productivity meant that "from the most intimate connections between men and women to the most public ones between ruler and ruled, all relationships mimicked those of slavery" (Berlin 1998, 8). However, once Britain and the U.S. saw a post-World War II social shift to industrial wage labor from enslaved, indentured or sharecropping farm labor, and a subsequent need to provide broad-based education to the upcoming generations of industrial wage-earners of all ethnicities and genders making up the new working classes, *Doctor Who* began to experiment with breaking down outdated hierarchical modes of instruction and encouraging progressive exploratory methods of teaching learners to perpetually self-instruct. *Doctor Who*'s companions and vicarious learners, in a rapidly expanding mid-twentieth-to-early-twenty-first-century universe, must become true world—or intergalactic—citizens if they, and we all, are to survive.

These learning experiences, though seemingly free of responsibility in their Montessori-like openness to each companion's choice of selections, force the companions to take on a degree of responsibility that they may not otherwise have willingly taken, had they only participated as hierarchically lower-ranking observers in the Doctor's adventures. Similarly, the initial apparent freedom in the Montessori classroom is contained by certain limits and safeties, within which

students may develop knowledge and skill. According to Mario Montessori, Maria Montessori's method—as well as the Doctor's—embraces the practice of observing and teaching according to students' innate tendencies and abilities. "Knowledge and understanding of these Human Tendencies," Montessori explains, "forms part of the basis for an education which is designed to assist the optimum development (preservation) of each individual" (1956, 20). The Montessori theory is that following the learner's natural inclination will, by necessity for survival, lead to the student's intellectual and skill development.

At the side of the Twelfth Doctor, Bill finds inspiration to become a student. A university canteen assistant when she first meets the Doctor in "The Pilot," Bill learns through her reality-defying experiences how to understand and engage with the Doctor's lectures. He tutors her as they travel the universe, and Bill steadily shows her developing grasp of microsocial, macrosocial, and vastly abstract issues and ideals. Her growth as a student and universe traveler is clear during her time as a companion, with Bill developing an impressive sense of responsibility and selflessness by the end of her time with the Doctor.

Because each companion becomes an integral part of the Doctor's travels, each must process and use the authority he or she has been given, whether dictating where to go or trying to be an objective, disinterested and non-participatory observer. Being a cosmic looker-on is an avoidant technique that never works to absolve the companion of decision-making pressures and responsibility because, like any conscientiously humanistic educator, the Doctor never tolerates the passive absorption of information without testing what his mentees are learning. In the Doctors' high-octane learning universe, every choice the companions are allowed, encouraged or forced to make directly impacts the Doctor, the citizens of the universe and the very fabric of time, itself. Whatever the immediate, urgent lesson of the moment, each of the companions and all of their viewers are thereby constantly forced to learn that they must be thoughtful, responsible world citizens or face infinitely echoing repercussions and the heavy weight of guilt for selfish, precipitate or misjudged choices.

Project-based instruction is intended to give students the opportunity to tackle real-world problems and to confront, accept and attempt to deal with the implications and responsibilities involved in doing so. The Doctors' project-based teaching method becomes both Socratic and Freire-ian in its pedagogical application. The companions must not only solve a potential problem but must also face the massive weight of the multiple, multiplying and interacting repercussions of every decision made in the process. Companion Amy does this, for instance, in her first travelling adventure with the Eleventh Doctor, "The Beast Below."

Amy is confronted with the issues surrounding the extinction of her own species. But Amy is also responsible for deciding whether to rescue or to perpetuate the abuse of the endangered and mistreated starwhale that has saved the British human survivors. Amy's first adventure is the Doctor's opportunity to be a guide, to inform his companion about the impact of her choices and mentor her through the steps that will make her a thoughtful and—perhaps, even—beneficent

time-traveler. Instead, Amy wipes her own memory and hides this painful conundrum from the Doctor. Because of Amy's initial solution to the impossible decision between saving the whale or saving the people aboard the starship, and the Doctor's furious disapproval of her perceived abuse of that decision-making authority, she comes to also face the consequences of having chosen to continue to perpetuate the starwhale's suffering while absolving herself and the Doctor of guilt by wiping clear her own memory.

Amy wishes to spare the Doctor an agonizing decision but gives him the pain of the realization that she would hide something of such magnitude for a seemingly petty–or at least cowardly—reason. While he faces as difficult a decision as Amy's, himself, the Doctor needs Amy to see that she must confront such decisions head-on. Running away from the burden of responsibility can only lead to extended and increasingly conflict-laden problems for all involved. In order to overcome this adventure-ending predicament, a dialogue must be opened. In this interaction, the viewer learns through Amy that hard decisions and painful choices must not only be made, but their consequences must be faced and accepted.

Amy, realizing what decision her guide and mentor faces and being able to observe his, Queen Elizabeth's and the starwhale's efforts to do what they agree by consultation and consensus is most right among a sea of potentially wrong choices, understands why communication is so crucial and whose interests she must keep continually uppermost in mind. Amy thereby becomes not only a conscious and conscientious participant in the resolution of the starwhale's suffering but learns to accept the realization that those whose times she visits are going to find their lives influenced by her actions. If it is she who has the power to impact others' timelines, then, Amy learns, she must be careful, alert, self-aware, deliberate in her choices, and responsible: the humanist educator's model pupil.

Teaching using dialogue is a concept that Freire goes to great lengths to identify and explain. It is a potential challenge to educators, even after decades of the availability and translation of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, to understand and apply dialogic teaching effectively. Teaching through dialogue is not, as one may potentially assume, a simple method of communicating assignments to students, nor even finding engaging ways to communicate lessons. Instead, the dialogic pedagogical method requires an open dialogue, facilitated by the instructor, that manages to successfully engage the student in the subject matter on a personal level. The instructor does not speak at the student in the sense of delivering a lecture in monologue; the instructor speaks with learners who have the responsibility of controlling their own educational destinies.

This control is a potential threat to the established structure of pedagogy, as Freire notes in his work. An educated populace is a powerful populace. It is miseducation, or the lack of any education at all, that creates groups that can be oppressed. While there exist ways in which an educated population can be manipulated, managing to do so is much more of a challenge than the manipulation and even the control of a group that cannot interpret for itself the information to which it is exposed. An educated and empowered populace results in what Freire refers to

as true organization (1968, 148). Education, as Freire presents it, is a tool for personal, social and political empowerment.

For example, Amy as first companion of the Eleventh Doctor understands the years of experiential lessons she has been taught about existence. She has come to learn that there are things she can change, and that there are things she cannot change but can survive. She has internalized what she has learned to the extent that she chooses to make the painful decision to join her husband in a remote and fixed point in time in "The Angels Take Manhattan," forever losing the Doctor and the life she led on her own timeline, when her husband is gone and the Doctor is too distraught to make a decision. Taking responsibility implies that the learner is assuming the authority of teacher and taking moral ownership. In this developing worldview, certain events cannot be changed, but those other events that are malleable imply tremendous responsibility on the part of the companion and viewer as vicarious companion, whose choices made during each episode might potentially wipe out whole civilizations. Conversely, not being able to change certain events presents each companion and viewer with the difficult lessons of simultaneously practicing adaptability while consciously embracing humility in letting go of expectations, in the complex processes of growth and psychosocial development.

Illustrating this point, Donna, best friend of the Tenth Doctor, experiences both the crippling helplessness of being unable to change the consequences of one horrible event and the obverse empowerment of changing the seemingly impossible. Travelling through history, Donna discovers that the Doctor cannot save the residents of Pompeii, despite his genius and technology. She must face the loss of those with whom she has developed personal bonds and thus acquiesce to fate. Donna later becomes a hero to the Ood, a species subjugated by humans. Able to see the needs of her own species and to sympathize simultaneously with those of the Ood, Donna's ability to keep a humanistic focus while travelling with the Doctor has become so strengthened through practice during their time together that she transcends the status of companion and is able to become part of a new team: the Doctor/Donna. The student has been so guided and supported through her initiation into this new world of knowledge and potential that she has reached the level of mentor, herself. Though, unfortunately, the Doctor/Donna cannot continue to exist because human brains cannot handle the information overload feed from the Tardis, Donna's intellectual development shows the potential success of the Doctor's methods. It is thereby proven to be possible for the student to master the teacher's lessons.

An exceptional example of the student achieving mastery of his or her learning experiences in the universe of *Doctor Who* is in the intellectual and skill development of Rose. The first of the rebooted Doctor's companions, Rose spends several years travelling with two of his incarnations. From the first, Rose learns two important lessons. First, some sort of fate or cosmic rule exists that certain things cannot be changed. These fixed points in time allow future developments and advances to happen that impact world and universal history. As painful as it may be to accept certain unpleasant realities, it is sometimes necessary. Rather than changing or denying the past,

the student becomes prepared to positively impact the present and future. Secondly, even if a person has the ability to wield destructive and restricting power over others, one should choose to empower instead of disempower or destroy others. The Ninth Doctor seeks peaceful resolution and happy endings as often as possible, celebrating them when they happen. When his own resolve fails, Rose has learned enough to remind him of those contractual obligations of time travel. By the end of the Ninth Doctor's time, the student has taught and even saved the teacher. Even after their time together is over, the Tenth Doctor's lessons to Rose continue to develop. He has so empowered her that, when they lose each other in alternate universes, Rose continues to work on her own until she can eventually break inter-universe travel rules that even the Doctor could not manipulate, to rescue him.

Martha, a doctor who is arguably one of the most well-trained students of the Doctor, learns to balance her logical understanding of the experiences she has with the Tenth Doctor with her emotional responses to each of them and her relationship with the Doctor, himself. She serves as an apprentice, doctor to his Doctor, learning to apply her theoretical preparation and philosophies to every otherworldly situation she encounters. Martha's medical apprenticeship years before she enters the Doctor's collection of companions prepares her for each life- and death-deciding situation that she encounters at his side. The only insurmountable challenge to this companion's partnership with the Doctor is not a struggle understanding the worlds-wide effect of every decision made but the desire to be seen as a peer, not a student, and to feel central to the attentions of the Doctor, who is still mourning the loss of Rose.

The real-time situations in which companions find themselves test theoretical solutions, intellectual assumptions and biases. Whether due to the unalterable reality of fixed points in time or the Doctor's less than accurate navigation through the space-time continuum, though certain situations can be mended or reversed, most dilemmas are incontrovertible. Wounds heal but do not disappear. Scars accumulate both for the Doctor and every companion until one dies, regenerates, or leaves the other behind. The Doctor provides the universe as a classroom, but the classroom is life. The consequences of every decision are immediate and, increasingly, irreversible. The inevitability of consequence, rather than time, hangs over both Doctor and companion. Each adventure in which the characters find themselves not only teaches new concepts and experiences, but again and again tests the characters' commitment to certain standards and preconceptions. Convictions are tested, even as they are being formed. Companions, along with the Doctor, must establish a functional idealism or be destroyed in the process of failing to do so.

Malleable points in time are so because all involved in that event still fulfill their roles-as-duties within that time; gravity is the reason bodies run in real-time. The Doctor's dialogic lessons are grounded in "the body." In the highly abstract lessons taught throughout the *Dr. Who* series, time, space and limits are all understood through the boundaries of the body. Just as Amy's decisions could have killed the last living starwhale or the human survivors on the ship it tows, companion Clara's moon adventure, "Kill the Moon," has the viewer learning another painfully

personal as well as abstract lesson. Travelling with the Twelfth Doctor and one of her own students, Clara is faced with a species-destroying set of decisions. The moon is an egg, the episode posits, and that egg is about to hatch. If the moon-egg hatches, humankind may be wiped out with the side-effects of the loss of the moon's earth-balancing gravity. But, to keep the mass of the moon in place, the innocent hatchling inside the moon-egg must be killed. The moon would thereby become a huge, glowing tomb, a constant visible reminder of the price paid for earthlings' survival. This education through the body is perhaps in no episode more forcible than in this one, in which viewers' reality is threatened by the imminent potential loss of gravity and, with it, corporeal existence as all viewers know it. Clara discovers, when faced with the apparently horrible dilemma of the death of one (hatchling) versus the death of many (earthbound beings), that the Doctor's choices are almost always painful and haunting. These travels present not just adventures, the companion and vicarious learner-as-companion learn; these adventures encapsulate reality-defining decisions.

Instead of Amy's decision of indecision, Clara passes preemptive judgment. In the end, it turns out that the hatchling immediately lays another egg, keeping everything in balance. No deaths have been necessary, this time; and the viewer can breathe a sigh of relief as one learns along with Clara that, as is usually the case with the natural world, nature will develop a way to balance itself. Sometimes the intuitive decision involves more information than the rational mind has had an opportunity to recognize that it is processing. Sometimes it is necessary to go with one's "gut." Rarely, but wonderfully, the viewer through Clara's choice learns, courage and audacity may be rewarded with an unexpected happy ending.

A vivid example of the unfortunate consequences of questionable decisions and the refusal to accept difficult life lessons is the forfeit of Clara's mortal life and existence for the Twelfth Doctor following her insistence that he use anachronistic technology to artificially revive Ashildr, a young woman Clara feels is unfairly robbed of life, in spite of the Doctor's protestations. Clara's insistence that Ashildr be saved are successful, thanks to the unusual circumstances of her relationship with the Doctor. While Clara is not the first companion already in place to greet a new incarnation of the Doctor, she has the unique role of being asked by his former self to take care of the new version. Mentor and mentee roles, therefore, get confused and the power dynamics of the relationship between the Twelfth Doctor and Clara become unstable. The instability of the power dynamic between the Twelfth Doctor and Clara is great and destructive enough that their relationship leads to the intergalactic "Hell Bent" legend of a dangerous Hybrid, composed of two peers who are so alike that they do not hold each other accountable, driving each other to make increasingly catastrophic decisions. The immortal Ashildr, whose memories disappear over time, is one of those catastrophic decisions. Ashildr's post-first death existence directly leads to Clara's death—which, even if postponed, cannot be avoided—and the following removal of her existence from the Doctor's memory. In defying and denying the reality in front of her, Clara condemns Ashildr to an endless, lonely, resentful existence and takes

Ashildr's place in death. The price for Clara's refusal to accept the lesson the Doctor attempts to teach in "The Girl Who Died" is the forfeit, however delayed, of her own life. She must replace what she did not allow to take place.

Differentiated instruction is presented by theorists Freire and Tomlinson as a challenging yet effective method of reaching and successfully involving students in their own learning experiences. Applying Tomlinson's *The Differentiated Classroom* to the series *Doctor Who*, the Doctor develops a curriculum of complex instruction and orbital studies through which to develop learners' personal involvement, understanding, and skills of synthesis and mastery. The mentoring instructor must "study students continually and systematically to identify individual strengths. Teachers then design complex instruction tasks that call upon the various student abilities" (1999, 69), which process, in turn, hones those developing abilities. Though the weight of responsibility on the instructor who teaches through complex instruction is heavy, such education makes it possible for students who may otherwise not realize their potential strengths to feel empowered by and responsible for the development of their own skills.

The companions may spend a few episodes or an entire season, if not their entire time with the Doctor, "orbiting" around a particular theme. In orbital studies, a concept Tomlinson credits to Chris Stevenson, an instructor links the lessons and investigations from which students may choose to develop their own topics—or, for the Doctor's companions, in which they choose their adventures—to some aspect of the curriculum. Linking back to Freire's dialogues, Tomlinson explains that, "orbitals work from the premise that all learners are dignified by developing and sharing knowledge and skills" (1999, 71). The instructor is the facilitating mentor whose work is to keep students' explorations within the boundaries stated in their learning contracts. Tomlinson explains that the contract allows the students freedom to explore within the extent of the possibilities set in otherwise planned lessons by the instructor. Once the terms have been set, students and companions are free to explore, not being held back by the instructor so that their behavior and choices can be closely monitored. Rather, learners guide themselves to stay within the limited restrictions that they have been given. The challenge is that the instructor is constantly evaluating his or her methods based on student receptivity and performance and modifying those methods and practices accordingly. Such an instruction experience is flexible, malleable, endlessly variable, and therefore never the same.

Flexible instruction can be difficult to evaluate and even more difficult to support in the current educational climate, in which standardization has more weight than individual experience. Nevertheless, if the practice of personally involving students in their own educations is as crucial to students' long-term growth and success as when the Doctor first undertook this approach on television half a century ago, then U.S. pedagogy may be well-advised to adopt the widely traveled and well-tried pedagogical methodologies of *Dr. Who*.

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