

# Interpassive students in interactive classrooms

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A lecturer will ask the audience ‘and can anybody tell me what this is?’ And she or he is met by an everlasting silence, with people refusing to look her in the eye ... Now the thing is, I’m a very confident person ... I’m very outgoing. I usually volunteer to do presentations but even I felt too awkward to even speak. The atmosphere was toxic silence, which turned into pain when the lecturer would probe the audience ... ‘anyone?’ I distinctly remember one lecture where the ‘anyone?’ continued for around two minutes in desperation for the audience to provide her with any confidence and truthfully, it was the most painful two minutes of my life. Half of the audience were already on their phones because they had already given up or were just bored mindless. The other half don’t want to speak.<sup>1</sup>

The above description from a London university will be recognisable to students and faculty everywhere because it reflects the ever-expanding norm of universities today: student disengagement and failed desperate attempts at interactivity. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that we are now amid a ‘stunning level of student disconnection’.<sup>2</sup> Something is going seriously wrong. Despite enormous investment in the ‘student experience’ – ranging from campus architecture that looks like airport terminals and ‘flipped classroom’ platforms to the requirement for all university teachers to be certified by professional associations – the reality is that lecture theatres today are increasingly dysfunctional spaces in which teaching and learning does not, and often *cannot*, take place. Ironically, despite the chorus of indignation lamenting the rise of the student as consumer, today the student is all too often precisely the person who *refuses to consume* their education.

Rather than lapse into despair and indignation, or embrace fetishised and overblown claims about the new

realities of Gen Z brains or their consumerism, we seek an alternative interpretation of this mass phenomenon of disengagement. To do so we return to critiques of 1990s ideology that embraced the *a priori* virtue of interactivity, and mine concepts of ‘interpassivity’ and ‘flat affect’ for their strategic potential. Given widespread acknowledgement that universities are today captured by neoliberalism, we refuse to accept that student disengagement is the problem. Just maybe, we suggest, it is the antidote.

## 1990s ideology

Indicative of 1990s web boosterism was David Bowie’s famous BBC interview with Jeremy Paxman.<sup>3</sup> Bowie, sparkling with excitement, promised that in the twenty-first century all content would be incomplete until the audience actively engaged and transformed it. This was the era of the famous ‘dotcom’ bubble, where finance rushed investment into anything internet related, until, inevitably, the bubble ‘burst’. ‘Interactivity’ was understood as a general experience rather than a function associated with specific technologies. It was expected to herald a new era of empowerment and democratisation that would flatten and transform fields of media, education, politics and art.<sup>4</sup>

Henry Jenkins influentially theorised that media were becoming driven by a participatory culture wherein consumers desired to have the media they want, where they want it, when they want it, and in the format they want, leading to what he termed a *convergence culture* where what might be traditionally understood as media producers and consumers become transformed into participants expected to interact with each other.<sup>5</sup> As

Turner recounts, the era was understood as pointing towards peer-to-peer adhocacy and a levelled market: ‘In the mid-1990s, as first the Internet and then the World Wide Web swung into public view, talk of revolution filled the air. Politics, economics, the nature of the self – all seemed to teeter on the edge of transformation’.<sup>6</sup>

‘Interactivity’ became understood by some as indicative of postmodernism, or as Jacques Rancière put it, a disguised postmodernism.<sup>7</sup> For example, the rise of ‘postmodern museums’ abandoned ‘traditional display cases, silent contemplation and the aura of priceless authenticity’, to be replaced with ‘an anti-elitist emphasis on participation, involvement, sound and lighting effects, performance, and the creation of spectacular multimedia “experiences”’.<sup>8</sup> In this moment we see a broad paradigm shift across multiple fields. Inasmuch as the promise of interactivity was held to be positive, traditional modes of delivery came to be regarded as unacceptably arcane and predicated upon passive consumption. According to Žižek, what was being celebrated was the *democratic potential* of interactive media that would emancipate users from the role of passive observer, not only to participate

actively in the spectacle, but increasingly to establish its very rules.<sup>9</sup>

Rancière had long questioned the purpose of public education in terms of equality of intelligence and the power dynamics between students and teachers, most notably in his influential *Ignorant Schoolmaster*.<sup>10</sup> In 2008 he returned to this question, now transplanting the teacher-student dynamic to one of theatre performer and audience in order to reassess at a time when it was fashionable to celebrate the notionally *a priori* virtues of interactivity and denigrate passivity. Rancière parodied the popular discourse as follows: Spectatorship is a bad thing because to be a spectator means being passive and separated from the possibility of doing. Instead we must aspire to activate the spectator towards action and to do so, theatre must be transformed into a place where action is actually performed by living bodies in front of living bodies. ‘What is required’, he noted, ‘is a theatre without spectators, where those in attendance learn from as opposed to being seduced by images; where they become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs’.<sup>11</sup> Theatres, like universities, have been guilty



of making spectators passive and must seek redemption through giving back to the spectators their collective energy.

## Interactivity and pedagogy

For Rancière, the issue was primarily knowledge transmission and indeed, during the 1990s, pedagogy became subjected to media innovations around classroom interactivity, with didactic modes of lecturing increasingly critiqued as outdated because they were said to be predicated on student passivity. In 1997, for example, the British government commissioned the Dearing Report which concluded that the effectiveness of university teaching and learning needed to be improved and that universities must take full advantage of the advances in communications and information technology to radically alter the shape and delivery of learning, while emphasising the importance of interactive teaching and learning.<sup>12</sup> The Dearing Report recommended a professional accreditation programme for university teachers to oversee these improvements, leading to the formation of the Higher Education Academy. Today almost all British university faculty must formally be certified in pedagogical methods and gain a ‘fellowship’ at the Higher Education Academy, and this typically entails learning to embrace interactive teaching as best practice, and subsequently propagating this style to attain higher levels of ‘fellowship’. The 1990s’ preferences for pedagogical interactivity have become institutionalised.

Yet despite the professional commitment to developing vibrant interactive pedagogy, the reality of the classroom today is often one of malaise. The late Mark Fisher noted that students are now more immobilised than ever:

During lessons at our college ... students will be found slumped on desks talking almost constantly, snacking incessantly (or even, on occasions, eating full meals) ... The lack of an effective disciplinary system has not, to say the least, been compensated for by an increase in student self-motivation ... They typically respond to this freedom not by pursuing projects but by falling into hedonic (or anhedonic) lassitude: the soft narcosis, the comfort food oblivion of Playstation, all-night TV and marijuana.<sup>13</sup>

Across university schools, faculty will describe the struggle to generate rare sparks of life in classrooms. Dur-

ing lockdown, a common reprise was students turning off cameras during online lectures, leaving the lecturer unclear if anybody was listening at all. Fisher’s supposition is that young people are struggling to concentrate in the contemporary attention economy – a common refrain. According to pedagogy theorist James Lang, the problem is that the *distractability* of devices is not properly managed in classrooms and we fail to harness those devices’ potential for pedagogy, nor do we sufficiently appreciate how young people’s capacities have been transformed by technology.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Michel Serres regards any indignation over how younger people do not concentrate as marking an insufficient appreciation of just how different the lives of young people are today.<sup>15</sup> The entire premise of pedagogy as knowledge transmission is, he claims, an anachronistic misnomer inasmuch as the knowledge is already distributed online. A further popular view is that students have been absorbed by a consumerist subjectivity that is not conducive to education. Perhaps most notably, Bernard Stiegler theorises how this consumerism is a form of proletarianisation that has transformed students into demanding clients who are impossible to satisfy, but also into people so absorbed and libidinally captured by media devices that they are unable to concentrate or engage in any properly transformative education.<sup>16</sup> The result is to leave their lecturers in a completely impossible position.

The general conclusion from these popular analyses is that the ‘solution’ for learners struggling to concentrate must be grounded in lecturers rejecting didactic teaching methods and a greater push towards more interactive modes of pedagogy cognisant of the changed features of the Gen Z brain and a more enlightened embrace of technology in the classroom – a doubling down without ever wondering if the interactivity itself might be the problem’s source. In this sense, the tone of discussion has hardly altered since the 1990s when, as Robert Pfaller observed, ‘a vast audience of believers’ reading ‘euphoric texts’ presented ‘a discourse of interactivity, facilitated mainly by new media’.<sup>17</sup> The discourse of interactivity, he contended, was grounded on unquestioned facts and therefore constituted more of an ideology than a theory.

In the *Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière argued that the distance between the performer and spectator should not be understood as an evil to be abolished but as the

normal condition of communication. Rancière asked the pertinent question: what if ‘it is precisely the attempt at suppressing the distance that constitutes the distance itself?’<sup>18</sup> Rancière argued that it is the act of looking, of being a spectator, that confirms or modifies distribution and that interpreting the world is already a means of transforming or reconfiguring the world. His point, therefore, is that the spectator was always already active: observing, selecting, comparing and interpreting. Further, Rancière rejected any normative principle that dramaturgy should aggregate an audience into a community, but rather claims that the collective power of spectators is not to be found in their propensity for interactivity, but rather in their power to translate, in their own way, what they are looking at. At stake in this idiosyncrasy, he believed, was our power to make our own way in the world and it is precisely that capacity, Rancière argued, that works through the very unpredictable and irreducible distances that the discourse of interactivity now seeks to eliminate. Correspondingly, we advocate scepticism towards any claim that ‘didactic’ lecturing produces student passivity or that teachers must strive to ‘activate’ their students.

## Interpassivity

Robert Pfaller reads radical possibility into dysfunctional phenomena like disengaged students slumped over desks, and he does so by regarding the disengagement itself as a strategy of escape and potentiality. The name of the strategy is *interpassivity*.<sup>19</sup> To that end, it is important to note how the supposedly disengaged student will nonetheless go through formal practices of engagement: dutifully turning up for lectures, submitting term papers and sitting exams. Rather than see the act of turning up to a lecture but then not listening as contradictory, Pfaller might regard this as typically interpassive behaviour. His examples of interpassivity include a student who purposefully spends hours in a library photocopying course literature that they will never read. Or a person recording movies but never watching them. Or a person who watches a comedy show yet never laughs. In each case the pleasure is delegated onto an external object, as though it is the photocopier that studies the texts, the Tivo box that watches the movies and the canned laughter that is amused by the comedy. This

delegation of enjoyment is the basis of interpassive behaviour and, Pfaller argues, is a widespread but largely unacknowledged form of cultural behaviour today.

For Žižek, this belief in the subjectivity of commodities is an instance of Marx’s commodity fetish whereby we perversely have object relations between people but subject relations between commodities. Such thinking is clearly present in marketing theory via influential concepts like the ‘brand personality’ or the ‘consumer identity project’ that inherently assume it isn’t people who have identities or personalities but, rather, that it is done for them by the brands they consume. As Žižek notes, advertising conventionally performs the pleasure of consumption: ‘Coke cans bearing the inscription “Ooh! Ooh! What taste!” emulate in advance the ideal customer’s reaction’.<sup>20</sup> The crucial ideological moment for Žižek is to be found in consumer culture’s injunction that we must enjoy ourselves. His example is of a family holiday; ‘a father who works hard to organize a family holiday and, after a series of postponements, tired of it all, shouts at his children: “Now you’d better enjoy it!” On a holiday trip, it is quite common to feel a superego compulsion to enjoy: one “must have fun”, and one feels guilty if one doesn’t enjoy it’.<sup>21</sup> In such a circumstance, any external object that we might delegate our obligation to enjoy the holiday to, would be very useful.

For Pfaller, the interpassive moment is marked by two stages. First, pleasure must be transferred to a representative agent or object. Second, we must transfer belief in the illusion they have staged to an undefined and naïve other. To return to the example of a family who feel obliged to enjoy their holiday even though they are all fed up – the family might take photographs in which they all smile as though they are having great fun. The photograph will be to prove to some external person that it was, in fact, a magnificent holiday after all. The possibility that this person might believe in the illusion of the magnificent holiday is enough. Both Pfaller and Žižek argue that we engage in such behaviour routinely.

## The interpassive classroom

The radical possibility of interpassivity lies in its ability to oppose interpellation – the ideological moment theorised by Althusser in which we recognise ourselves as the subject of a hail and become interpellated within

a power order.<sup>22</sup> (Althusser's famous example is when a police officer shouts 'hey you there!' and you turn around.) Pfaller's argument is that interpassivity may be interpreted as anti-ideological behaviour: a strategy of escaping identification and the consequent interpellation.

With this in mind, we can return to the phenomenon of disengaged students. Rather than view disengagement as an absolute negative, we might instead interpret the students as opposing their interpellation by the obviously corrupted ideology of the contemporary university. The formal performance of studying and learning, then, is staged for the naïve other (the external examiner or perhaps the university chancellor who presents graduands with parchment, apparently highly impressed by the magnificent work the students have done). To paraphrase a Soviet joke, 'we pretend to teach, and they pretend to learn'. In this regard, the greatest threat to the contemporary ideologically saturated university is not that the students are passive, but as Žižek warns, 'the real threat of new media is that they deprive us of our passivity, of our authentic passive experience, and thus prepare us for mindless frenetic activity – for endless work'.<sup>23</sup>

And there's no denying the depth of frenetic ideology permeating contemporary universities where students are, to give one example, told to identify the 'twelve meta skills required by employers, and to build those skills throughout your own academic journey'.<sup>24</sup> These instructions are typical of how university life is today defined by injunctions of optimisation. At stake is a system that seeks to impose 'total education', requiring a full transformation of each individual through a constant regulatory and (e)valuative determination.<sup>25</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten draw from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* which argues that the prevailing 'banking model' of education dehumanises students.<sup>26</sup> Instead, Freire wanted education to be a forum whereby teacher and student discuss together to achieve equality based on understanding present forms of domination. The term Harney and Moten use to describe this process of coming together to arrive at a mode of being not grounded in oppression is *study*, and they argue that the contemporary university is not only itself non-conducive to the possibility of study but also that there is an active preclusion or prevention of study by university administration and an apparent disavowal of study from students

themselves.<sup>27</sup> Their argument is that the university has become alienated from its own capacity to study, and that prevailing pedagogical methods only manifest that exploitation of our capacity to study.

And why shouldn't students disavow their education when, drawing from Jodi Dean's analysis, the promises of interactivity are typically a lie?<sup>28</sup> Media users, she tells us, who are interested in politics don't really actively contribute to content but are led to believe that they are making a difference by clicking a button, adding their name to a petition or commenting on a blog. For Dean these interactive practices are fetishes: we think we are being active but are actually being displaced from any 'real' action. The same goes, we might say, for interactive classrooms. For example, as part of the professionalisation of pedagogy, 'learning outcomes' and class content are mediated and predetermined months – and often years – in advance by faculty committees and do not arise organically from class discussion. Therefore the interactivity is a fetish: the lecturer doesn't really want to hear what students have to say, rather they just want the students to participate in order to boost the session's affective intensity as a goal in its own right. Student participation, therefore, is not creating nor impacting content and should be regarded as inauthentic dialogue. Accordingly, we should not think it is weird that students prefer to remain silent. A common reprise is for classroom technology to boost the possibilities for interactivity, yet as Dean might argue, technology then becomes the fetish whose actual role is to stand in for the disengaged student and to keep alive the fantasy of an active, engaged student subject. Moreover, to focus on student participation is to overlook the grim economics that defines the student experience as increasingly grounded in debt and anxiety – what Peter Fleming terms the 'student hellscapes' that are never measured or accounted for in student satisfaction surveys.<sup>29</sup>

The interactive classroom therefore constantly demands students to be highly expressive of affect, perhaps to the point of excess, and for their faces to provide a constant feedback loop of enthusiastic reinforcement for neurotic lecturers. By contrast, a facial expression of unavailability might be read as offering a degree of protection from the depletion demanded by the neoliberal university. This recourse is, according to Lauren Berlant, 'flat affect': an expressionless presentation, or

an emotional opacity, in which affective display, in the face in particular, has little range, intensity and mobility, and feelings become unclear.<sup>30</sup> Berlant reads these moments as offering a degree of reserve from situational injunctions. Berlant resists any implication that flat affect occurs in lieu of the subject taking responsibility for their feelings and perceptions. In other words, flat affect might serve as a passive-aggressive mode of affective agency, rather than a substitute for it. Perhaps the most notable example of flat affect as strategy was JG Ballard's *High Rise*, in which female characters wander the building in an apparently catatonic state, passively disengaged from the violent behaviour of the male occupants.<sup>31</sup> But the women are actually meeting in private and eventually kill or enslave the men and seize the building. The women's performative withdrawal allows them to both escape much of the men's violence, but also to bide their time while leading their enemy to underestimate them. Berlant warns, however, that flat affect is an ambivalent strategy, creating the possibility of self-erasure and therefore must be understood as a sort of final and desperate recourse for the profoundly disempowered.

### An ambivalent antidote

The significance of 'flat affect' for ideology is important to consider. Within the neoliberal university – certainly as determined by the Browne Report, which led to the trebling of British tuition fees – students are mobilised as the agent that will push for and demand university reform. Implicit in the all-important UK National Student Survey, for example, is the idea that the 'student experience' must be constantly measured and responded to as the engine that will drive university reform towards its predetermined neoliberal endpoint. Student affect, therefore, becomes a form of capital that a university seeks to build. In this regard, the students' affective response is not just pre-determined ('the students *want* more employability content') but also the key point of legitimation and the primary alibi for the neoliberal reterritorialisation of the university. The student subjectivity they are expected to inhabit, therefore, is one that is not just predetermined but also overdetermined, making excessive affective demands. In this context, the withdrawal into flat affect jams the juggernaut, leaving an excruciating absent centre.

What is most interesting about the disengaged student, then, is precisely their refusal to enjoy their education in the manner it is intended to be enjoyed. This is to reject analyses by Fisher and others who see a laziness or failure to concentrate at stake. Rather, we argue that what the students are refusing is precisely the real pleasure of being educated and instead prefer to commit themselves to only the drudgery of sitting uncomfortably in lectures or not turning up at all. It is as though the imagined 'other' is being delegated the quality experience of education, leaving the students to take on the misery and the expense, leaving the ideal of education intact. But it is also in this delegation that the interpellation towards the prescribed subjectivation can be circumvented. Pfaller notes that this situation results in a certain 'mischievous pleasure' of inhabiting an alternative subjectivity: a *rebellious* mode of learning outside of the subjectivation demanded from interactive engagement.

It is now over a decade since British universities experienced a wave of protest and occupation, led by militant student activists. Since then, Student Unions have been largely rationalised and integrated into the managerial infrastructure, with the radical University of London Union shut down permanently. Pushed to the edge, we might say – as Todd McGowan and Ryan Engley do – that the interpassive student *stands in for* the missing revolutionary impulse, leaving them with what Fisher called 'reflexive impotence'.<sup>32</sup> But rather than see passivity as an absolutely negative symptom of malaise, we argue for the interpassive as an ambivalent antidote for the narcissist age. In other words, in our students' gesture of refusing to see themselves enjoying their education, they are not resisting their own education but rather refusing its commodified and alienated form, leaving a gap which we, as their teachers, must work to interpret as carrying the possibility of a more authentic pedagogical encounter. Knowing as we do that resistance becomes co-opted, interpassivity marks the premise that 'resistance is not enough' just as it rejects the ideology that activity is good and passivity is bad.

Interpassive withdrawal is ambivalent because, as Berlant argues, flat affect is the final recourse of the profoundly disempowered that carries the risk of self-negation. As educators, our role must be to comprehend how we might positively respond to student disengagement, accepting its radical potential as a form

of anti-ideological behaviour and not just lamenting its destructiveness. We must learn how this can be done because the alternative is to exhaust ourselves reproducing the interactive fetish, or, worse, to allow this ambivalent strategy of interpassivity to lead to mutual self-negation.

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## Notes

1. 'UK universities are scamming us all: my time at Goldsmiths', *Youtube* (accessed July 2022), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Xrw4CIFI9w>.
2. Beth McMurtrie, 'A Stunning Level of Student Disconnection', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 5, 2022, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/a-stunning-level-of-student-disconnection>
3. David Bowie speaks to Jeremy Paxman on Newsnight (1999), *Youtube* (accessed October 2022), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FiK7s\\_OtGsg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FiK7s_OtGsg).
4. Margerite Barry and Gavin Doherty, 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Interactivity: Empowerment in Public Discourse', *New Media & Society* 19:7 (2017).
5. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).
6. Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 1.
7. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009).
8. Stephen Brown, *Postmodern Marketing* (London: Routledge, 1995), 74.
9. Slavoj Žižek, 'The Interpassive Subject' (accessed October 2022), <https://www.lacan.com/zizek-pompidou.htm>.
10. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).
11. Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 4.
12. The Dearing Report (accessed October 2022), <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/dearing1997/dearing1997.html>.
13. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (London: Zero Books, 2012), 28.
14. James Lang, *Distracted: Why Students Can't Focus and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Basic Books, 2020).
15. Michel Serres, *Thumbelina: The Culture and Technology of Millennials* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).
16. See Bernard Stiegler, *States of Shock* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015); *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* (California: Stanford University Press, 2010). For a helpful summary see also Kristy Forrest, 'The Problem of Now: Bernard Stiegler and the Student as Consumer', *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 52:4 (2019), 337–47.
17. Robert Pfaller, *Interpassivity: The Aesthetics of Delegated Enjoyment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 2–3.
18. Rancière, *Emancipated Spectator*, 134–35.
19. Pfaller, *Interpassivity*.
20. Žižek, *The Interpassive Subject*.
21. Žižek, *The Interpassive Subject*.
22. Louis Althusser, *On Ideology*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2008).
23. Žižek, *The Interpassive Subject*.
24. This is taken from a newsletter sent to students in a London business school.
25. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *All Incomplete* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2021).
26. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* [1970], trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (London: Penguin, 2006).
27. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013).
28. Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
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30. Robbie Duschinsky and Emma Wilson, 'Flat Affect, Joyful Politics and Enthralled Attachments: Engaging with the Work of Lauren Berlant', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 28 (2015). See also Lauren Berlant, 'Structures of Unfeeling: Mysterious Skin', *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 28 (2015).
31. JG Ballard, *High Rise* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006).
32. Todd MaGowan and Ryan Engley, *Interpassivity* (accessed October 2022), <https://soundcloud.com/whytheory/interpassivity>.