We are "Our Own Crisis": Locating the 'Crisis in Education'

Jagath Weerasinghe

This is the text of a keynote speech delivered at the Undergraduate Research Congress of the Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya held on 31 May 2022.

Making a keynote speech at this conference themed "Crisis in Education and Crisis as Education" at a moment of rapid and strange political change requires me to take a polemical rather than scholarly stance. I believe it is incumbent on me to warn you of such a character in my speech. The bourgeois radicalism that has taken centre stage in contemporary politics through the 'GotaGoGama' protest movement pushes me to be frank and outspoken about our university education. You might find the statements I make in this speech unresolved and not well informed. You might see my speech as a rough beast staggering from the rubble of 9 May[1] to the hallowed grounds of academia. Let that be. Please bear with me.

The theme of the conference belies a reality that we usually encounter in standing committee meetings of the University Grants Commission (UGC) and our curriculum development discussions. In those meetings, I have never encountered the kind of signification that the title of this conference proposes us to think about. In forums that are supposed to engage with issues pertaining to curriculum development or syllabus revisions, or general academic management, the presence of a crisis in education is normally not highlighted or acknowledged. The academic management protocols guarded by the UGC through its various circulars or the discussions that happen at statutory meetings empowered to address academic issues do not refer to any form of "crisis in education".

The crisis that usually takes time in these meetings is more often than not lack of facilities, new buildings, new equipment, or unruly student behaviour. In the reality that those authorised meetings perform their responsibilities, one encounters no existential anxieties that are emanating from a "crisis in education" at our universities. Our students also do not protest demanding better education, revision of curricula, or better teachers. The quality of education we give our students has never been a problem for them. But, outside those meetings, there are many in the humanities, social sciences, and fine arts, who claim that university education in those streams has taken a great dip in quality and standards. It is also noteworthy that such critical observations are not made on the education given in the science stream at our universities.

And yet, here, at this conference, the theme is "Crisis in Education and Crisis as Education". I find this particularly interesting, and challenging. I wonder what moved the organisers of this conference to come up with such a theme. What happens when the institution becomes self-critical and publicly takes the burden of unpacking itself, searching for a crisis within, with its glance fixed on the future? This is no small feat. In my keynote, I would like to try to walk into this labyrinthine issue from a self-critical perspective. I use the metaphor of labyrinth advisedly here. The crisis in education is not a maze that is already built with planned exits albeit confusing and hidden: rather it is a labyrinth which has no predetermined exits; one has to both find one's way in and out. A labyrinth is not completely out there, like the temporality of landscape; it's also in a subject's head.

"Crisis in Education and Crisis as Education" is an expansive theme. It nudges me to revise and rearrange it in such a way that I can tame its expansiveness, so that it can work within my capabilities/ in-capabilities of thinking. The theme can be turned into a terrain in which I can perform my biases that are rooted in my lived experiences as an educator for the past three decades.

The theme has two parts. First, it asserts the presence of a crisis in education, perhaps in general. The second part of the title is strategic. It opens the possibility of taking advantage of the "crisis" by transforming the problem itself into a solution. I am sympathetic to this proposed move, to this seeming wistfulness. My hesitancy here comes from my not knowing what the authors of this seminar saw as a crisis. Without knowing the features of the crisis, its transformation to something else becomes elusive, if not impossible. However, I have no doubt whatsoever that there is a crisis in education specifically in the humanities, social sciences, fine arts, and science in our universities. When I say 'science', I do not include engineering, medicine, dentistry, architecture, or such disciplines under this category. I mean only the pure sciences such as chemistry, physics, biology, etc. The reader might wonder how someone who is an artist and an art historian by training, and archaeologist by practice, can make this claim. Let me explain. I make this claim, having been a teacher to many postgraduate students from science, social science, fine arts, and humanities for over three decades at the Postgraduate Institute of Archaeology (PGIAR). Doctors, engineers, architects, lawyers, and science graduates, among others, come to PGIAR to study archaeology, art history, and heritage. A majority of students coming from arts and science streams show an acute lethargy, or perhaps incapability, towards thinking in the Heideggerian[2] sense, while doctors, engineers, lawyers, and architects are aware of their limitations in thinking. Please note that this is a highly generalised autobiographical statement on my part, and there have always been exceptional students from social science and arts backgrounds.

If there is a crisis in education in our universities, then where are the signs? What are the contours of this crisis? Who performs the signs that register a crisis? In this speech, I shall be focusing on the humanities, social sciences, fine arts, and pure sciences in our universities, since I believe there is a crisis in those disciplines, not in STEM[3] education. I claim, with an aphoristic touch, that STEM education will build the world in its concrete forms, but that the world will be ruined and burned in no time by our failure in the humanities, fine arts, social sciences, and pure sciences education.

We are witnessing one such destructive episode, once again in this country that, in my opinion, is a ramification of bad education in the humanities, social sciences, and fine arts. We produce large numbers of arts graduates who would go on to be the administrators in government offices and teachers in government schools. We entrust the fiscal, the administrative, and the educational future of the country to graduates who have been educated in an impoverished pedagogic system. The impoverishment in the pedagogic system stems from our reluctance or resistance to asking basic questions from the system to which we are accomplices.

The basic question we ought to confront, which we bypass, I claim, is the purpose of our undergraduate training in arts subjects. What can a BA training in the humanities or social sciences do to a young soul in his or her early 20s? What is the purpose of a BA in archaeology? Let me take an example from my own field. Unfortunately, most BAs in archaeology think that they become archaeologists with their first degree,

and we, the faculty, seem to encourage such thinking. A bachelor's degree in history will not make a historian. The world over, the usual practice is that someone becomes a professional in a field only with postgraduate training. But what does the curriculum in its textual reality tell them? What do we teach a student who likes archaeology? We teach archaeology and some history. And why do we teach them only those subjects? Are we of the opinion that those who do archaeology, history, or sociology would spend the rest of their lives doing those subjects? What are we training these young souls for? What do we really expect them to do after graduation? Protest on the streets? Act like half-baked historians, archaeologists, or sociologists? My claim is that we do not care about these questions at all. Some of us defiantly claim that such questions are not our concern.

In my opinion, the real problem, of which most of us are accessories, is that we have failed to realise the real importance of education in history, politics, ancient literature, fine arts, and pure sciences for future citizens, for the formation of a critically thinking mass in society, that is necessary for democracy. Our students have no sense of their place in the world, no sense of historical continuity, and more importantly, of radical ruptures. We have, with our curriculums, uprooted them from their present, or imprisoned them in perpetual limbo. We seem not to realise that a nation's strength comes from the type of education it offers. In my opinion, the crisis in education in the humanities, social sciences, fine arts, and pure sciences lies in our failure to empower our students with self-referential productivity, where the self is taken as an extension, expression, and temporality in the plurality. Said differently, with a nod to Nietzsche, seeing self as the materiality and the material expression of becoming.

Most, if not all degree programmes in the humanities, social sciences, fine arts, and pure sciences offered by our universities are actually about disseminating information and technicalities. If one asks a few critical questions about those programmes, one will realise that our degree programmes do not think of themselves as programmes of training minds for a particular idea of citizenship, subjectivity, or collectivity, but as programmes of making information junkies infatuated with rhetoric serving absolute notions and norms. We do not empower our students with critical theory, critical thinking that would allow them to see their own subject-formation critically, and find the so-called 'truths' that make them up.

The vital question that we should ask ourselves is: how do we empower young minds to resist the temptation that the 'will to power' encourages in a subject, to have a particular understanding of the world? A 'will to power' in which the self-consumption of peer-pressured truths in solidarity is cast as objective descriptions of our lived situations and, most importantly, of our historical predicament? We are all moved by the 'will to power'. This will to power prompts us to take certain claims/convictions as objective truths about the world, and this happens under peer pressure in universities. We go through a process of self-consumption of these peer pressured truths. It is this self-consumption that propels student protests, or any kind of popular protest. As undergraduates we do not have self-reflexivity. We are not trained to be so. My claim is that the crisis is located in our curriculums, in our teaching methods, and in the entire pedagogic system.

How has this Happened, Who has Institutionalised Such a Pedagogic System?

However, to say that the crisis lies in the way we teach and the way we have designed curriculums is a gross simplification of a much larger and complex problem. The crisis does not simply lie there. It is institutionalised by the UGC through its circulars of instrumentalised rationality and statutory meetings. And that institutionalisation is exalted by a legacy from the colonial era that popularised an art-science divide in the public schools, making those who study science in schools[4] more intelligent by default. We expect our arts students to have limited thinking capacity! We do not mind them skipping lectures!

It is necessary now to pay a close look at the UGC circulars, which I claim are at the core of institutionalising a crisis in education. I propose that these circulars are feudal and colonial in the way they envision operationalising the politics of management. What is the actual state of intertextual dynamics of these circulars? What is the larger field of texts that these circulars interact with? What is the nature of the political realities they engender when put into operation? These, I propose, are valid questions to raise because meaning in a text does not arise solely from the authorial intention, in this case, the UGC, but from a network of relations that precedes the text.

If one does a close reading of the qualitative qualifiers and descriptors, the adjectives used in the circulars, and the quantifiable results they expect, what you see

is that the circulars do one thing for sure; they deter any productive exchange of ideas, deter debate, debunk democratic engagements amongst the members in a selection committee. Said differently, the circulars mimic the coloniser, who by default mistrusted the natives. For the colonisers, the natives had no capacity for a productive exchange of ideas, for they were motivated solely by tribal and clan-centered interests, and heathen religions and myths. The UGC is bent on 'civilising' the universities, so to speak. I request you to look at the circulars on promotion to a professorship or the one stipulating the procedures to follow in selecting a Vice Chancellor or a Director for a Higher Education Institute. The UGC does not trust the very members it appoints to University Councils and Boards of Management! Obviously, the UGC does not have faith in the community of scholars that constitute a university, nor faith in the University Senates. The irony, however, is that the UGC and other authorised bodies are also populated by a selected group of people from the universities themselves.

How come those who found their way into those committees became 'correct' and 'intelligent' as soon as they entered those powerful committees? Does power automatically equate knowledge? Let us be honest here, our entry into those powerful committees has nothing to do with our capacities in thinking and criticality. Our upward mobility within the system is directly and indirectly linked to partisan politics in power, and to the hegemonic assumptions that hold the system together, such as the art-science divide, or "if peer-reviewed, then it must be good".

The UGC seems to take pleasure and pride in its top-down approach to universities and the culture of mistrust it spreads over the universities. This mindset of the UGC gives no autonomy to thinking creatively to address the problems the universities actually confront in the Lecture Halls, Boards of Study, and Faculty Meetings. These circulars engender a highly asymmetrical center-periphery relationship by making universities the dependencies of the UGC. The sad and ironic thing is that we are all very comfortable in this culture of mistrust and the 'power-equals-knowledge' scenario institutionalised by the UGC; we are beneficiaries of that culture. We are, in my opinion, "our own crisis".

There is an anti-intellectual facet to this culture of mistrust and the 'power-equals-knowledge' scenario which is rooted in the art-science divide that plagues our entire education system from primary to tertiary. If one takes a closer look at the Quality Assurance Council established within the UGC, they would be surprised to find that 99% of its members are from the science or technology streams. Does this mean research and innovation happen only in science and technology? Or does it mean that there is only one method to measure the quality of research and that is the positivist method? A method that works with the presumption that there is a separation between subject and object? Said differently, an object of study is a self-referential existence, and a researcher can objectively examine that existence. This is an old hat, some hundred years old! One of the early exponents of positivism was David Hume, the 18th century philosopher. The scientific world has moved, in waves, away from this positivist epistemology while our universities are still stuck in positivism.[5]

Researchers wearing positivist straightjackets, who represent a majority of faculty in our universities with a higher portion in the science streams, would take "establishing regularities between different classes of observable phenomena and trying to group these to form more general patterns" (Trigger 1998: 5) as explanations. Positivism cannot deal with emergent qualities in a system or phenomena under study, it tends to be reductionist, and it also tends itself toward the idea of "unified science" (ibid). Knowingly or not, the UGC and its Quality Assurance Council are victims, perhaps willingly, of this idealised and oppressive notion of "unified science". What the UGC and the so-called scientists of our universities is telling us is that they most probably think that good research is 'evidence' based in the positivist sense, but they do not ask the critical question that follows; how is evidence made? What constitutes 'evidence'? It is this kind of epistemic structuring that has caused a crisis in education, but that crisis finds its appearance in the arts streams more conspicuously, but not in the science stream. The reason for this is that our idea of science is rather parochial and narrow, and also anti-intellectual since it is wearing positivism without questioning the basic epistemic structurings that it proposes.

Let me tell you about my experience with 'science' graduates and propose a generalised opinion about them. I may be wrong here. Most of the 'science' graduates I have met have not been initiated into the history or philosophy of science, seeing science as a way of thinking with a particular kind of social history behind it. They have no clue of the great debates in science in the 20th century that shaped the way scientists do science; they have not met philosophers of

science! I have been appalled by the narrow perception of science among our science graduates. If science is a knowledge production field that believes uncritically in a cause-and-effect relationship, then on such a terrain epistemic structuring does not appear as a crisis, while being a crisis! But, on the other hand, such an epistemic structuring in the arts stream ends up producing 'laundry-lists' of research findings. Said more politely, research finds its epitome in taxonomy building, constructing classificatory systems along spatial and temporal lines, and proposing such classifications themselves as explanations. Archaeology and art history are replete with such research. What I am proposing is that the crisis in education is located in the way we think about 'science' and the 'scientific method'.

Research and innovation in arts streams cannot be done from within that epistemic structuring. Historical, sociological, anthropological, or archaeological narratives are fragmented, nonlinear, and discontinuous; their existence does not require the positivist certitude of cause and effect. I am rephrasing Michel Foucault (1972[1969]) here: what is necessary for arts research is critical studies, not just 'scientific' theory from a positivistic perspective. Archaeology, heritage, art history, sociology, and such subjects that engage with human emotions, and normative and imaginative capabilities of the human subject, both as an individual and a collective, need to be taught as critical practices. An object of research that a researcher defines for her investigation, by default dwells in a multiple hermeneutic; in a plurality of frames of references, in a plurality of interpretive frames. The critical point here is that it is the researcher herself who is required to bring these multiplicities to her object of research.

In the next section I shall briefly touch on what constitutes a critical practice, and then, finally, at the risk of being overly prescriptive, I shall propose a way to think of a pedagogic system that would address the core of the crisis in education.

Critical Theory and Critical Practice

I would argue that a university is a place where cultural and political values are both inculcated and contested. The humanities, social sciences, fine arts, and pure sciences have to be taught within such a setting. Making such a context is best accomplished by incorporating critical theory into the pedagogical system as a whole. Critical theory, as opposed to merely empirical and positivist modes of knowledge, is rooted in the concept of 'critique' (*Kritik*) and is a different kind of knowledge derived from the insights of German idealism and elaborated in Marx's writings. Critique in this tradition posits a specific way for a subject to relate to the world, to an object. In that, critique is set with the task of uncovering the social conditions that direct a subject to articulate knowledge about the world in a particular way.

As such, the purpose of critique is not only to change the way we comprehend the objective world, but also to transform both our understanding of the world and ourselves, the subject (Thompson 2017: 1-2). Critical theory is an interdisciplinary approach to cultural analysis, and it intends to reveal how ethical, social, and political thoughts work together, perhaps interdepending on each other in producing cultural knowledge. In this sense, critical theory has its beginnings with the Frankfurt School which launched influential cultural criticism. However, critical theory today has outgrown its early beginnings at the Frankfurt School with the 'linguistic turn' that structuralism and post-structuralism encultured.[6]

If we are to incorporate critical theory into the general curriculum, we have to answer the crucial question, which I raised earlier: what is the purpose of undergraduate training in arts and social science subjects?

My quick, yet considered response to this question is that the purpose is to create future citizenry who would become specialists in their chosen field if they want to. For this, there are lessons we can draw from the major US universities and a few Asian universities.

Professor Pericles Lewis writing in the *Harvard International Review* in 2013 claims that Asian territories such as Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, and Singapore, for example, are turning toward the pedagogic system known as liberal arts education. This is a US tradition in education. He claims;

> Asian governments have recognized that in an era driven by innovation, the breadth of an education that encompasses the liberal arts and science is a distinct advantage for future **workers**. Many also recognize the importance of education in history and politics for future **citizens** in an era of **democratization**. And Asian educators recognize the ethical benefits of studying literature, philosophy, and social science – the liberal arts give students an opportunity to think about their place in the world and how to live a fulfillable life" [Lewis 2013: 36 (author's emphasis)].

The idea that is important for our discussion in this quote is "liberal arts". The success of the major research universities in the US has been built on the tradition of the liberal arts college (ibid). My suggestion is that

we can address our crisis in education from a liberal arts education approach. In a liberal arts curriculum, a student is exposed to different kinds and forms of thinking, from historical to computational, from literary to engineering and applied mathematics, from political to philosophical, and many other forms of disciplinary thinking and knowledge production methodologies. Let me say this in a more descriptive manner. How can we think of training the future citizens of Sri Lanka if they have not been exposed to Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, Saussure, Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan, for example, on one hand, and on the other, the ancient literature of South Asia such as the *Mahabaratha*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Sandesha kavya*, and the European classics? And further, how do you think we can make meaningful citizens for the current century if they have not been told of the complex nature of colonialism, the bloody partition of India, the 'Black July' of 1983, and the struggles of the minorities in South Asia, communist revolutions in Asia, the workers' struggles in South Asia, and the Leftist movements?

To end my speech, let me summarise my main claims. I agree that there is a crisis in education in our universities, and I have argued that its location is in the pedagogic system in general. Our popular understanding of the idea of science and the scientific method is at the core of this crisis. The agency that institutionalised this crisis is the University Grants Commission. The way forward from this crisis is to reconsider the purpose of our undergraduate training, and redesign the curriculums with inputs from critical theory, thereby reorienting the humanities, social sciences, fine arts, and pure science degrees to comply with the parameters of liberal arts programmes that are now popular in many Asian universities.

Jagath Weerasinghe *is Emeritus Professor at the Postgraduate Institute of Archaeology, University of Kelaniya.*

Notes

1 Editor's Note: On 9 May 2022, during a state of emergency, a section of Mahinda Rajapaksa supporters summoned to a rally at Temple Trees in Colombo, unleashed violence on protestors camped opposite the Prime Minister's official residence as well as those outside the Presidential Secretariat. These acts sparked counter-violence across many parts of Sri Lanka in the course of the day, killing at least 10 people, injuring over 200 others, and arson and destruction of homes, other properties, and vehicles of over 78 politicians of the Sri Lanka Podujana Party.

2 See Heidegger, Martin. (1976[1952]). *What is called thinking.* Trans. J. Glenn Gray. San Francisco: Harper; Harman, Graham. (2007). *Heidegger Explained: from phenomenon to thing*. Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, ch. 9.

3 Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics education.

4 See Hobsbawm, Eric. (1975). *The Age of Capital 1848-1875*. London: Abacus, (55-59) for a brief analysis of this formation in public education.

5 See Trigger, Bruce. (1998). Archaeology and Epistemology: Dialoguing across the Darwinian Chasm. *American Journal of Archaeology,* 102: 1-34.

6 See Emerling, Jae. (2019). *Theory for Art History*. London and New York: Routledge.

References

Foucault, Michael. (1972 [1969]). *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Lewis, P. (2013). "Asia Invests in Liberal Arts: US Higher Education Expands Abroad." *Harvard International Review*, 35(1): 36-39.

Thompson, Michael J. (2017). "Introduction: what is Critical Theory?" In Michael J. Thompson (Ed.). *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Theory* (1-14). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Trigger, Bruce. (1998). Archaeology and Epistemology: Dialoguing across the Darwinian Chasm. *American Journal of Archaeology,* 102: 1-34.