Education and the concept of commons. A pedagogical reinterpretation

Morten Timmermann Korsgaard

To cite this article: Morten Timmermann Korsgaard (2018): Education and the concept of commons. A pedagogical reinterpretation, Educational Philosophy and Theory, DOI: 10.1080/00131857.2018.1485564

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2018.1485564
Education and the concept of commons. A pedagogical reinterpretation

Morten Timmermann Korsgaard
Faculty of Education and Society, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden

ABSTRACT
This paper explores the concepts of commons and commoning from an educational vantage point. These concepts point to places and activities that are shared, communal and un-privatised, in other words they point to places and practices not yet enclosed or appropriated by capital and market logics. Education is certainly a place and an activity that is increasingly being enclosed and appropriated by these logics, but at the same time education seems to always find ways of escaping this enclosure, and teachers and students find ways of being that escapes appropriation. Exploring the concepts of commons and commoning from an educational vantage point is thus an attempt at describing schooling as an activity that takes place in common and makes something common. By sharing and introducing a subject matter to the students, the teacher offers a shared space of exploration and study that can escape the instrumental and proprietarian framework of the neoliberal education agenda.

Introduction
In political theory and in local and rural political practices, there is a growing interest in the idea of commons and of commoning processes. Lately the concept has begun to gain interest in educational circles as well and the idea of knowledge, creative and intellectual commons has been influential for a while now. In this paper, I wish to explore the historical and conceptual foundations of commons and the practice of commoning, and try to engage it not in terms of production and labour, but as specific activities that human beings engage in. I will then connect this framework to the idea of education, not as a process of creating specific ends and learning outcomes, but as a specific way of being (engaged) together as human beings. In this way, we can imagine education as a process of commoning and schools as commons, not in terms of what is made or produced there, but as a specific time and space that we can make common and create in common. The paper thus attempts to reconceptualise the concepts of commons and commoning from an educational vantage point, rather than from its usual political point of departure.

Historically speaking, commons were either spaces that were not yet appropriated, enclosed or privatised, or spaces where the owner (typically a Nobility) of the land was obliged to allow the commoners to seek subsistence there. The idea of commons is typically exemplified by the history of the English woodlands and the Magna Carta and the Charter of the Forest, but commons (in their various forms) have historically been in practice in most parts of the world (Linebaugh, 2008). In these spaces,
Freemen and commoners could forage, let their animals graze and collect ‘estovers’. Commoning is the process of making a living of the land without appropriating, enclosing or privatising it, but by sharing in the natural resources that the forest or the land offers.

In current political theory, the concept of commons and commoning is often connected to anticapitalistic movements and ideas, and point to what has been coined postcapitalism (De Angelis, 2017). In this movement, the idea is that spaces that are common and processes of commoning point to ways of resisting the prevailing emphasis on growth and exploitation of human and natural resources in capitalist societies. By (re)turning to ideas of commoning and commons, farmers, fishers and rural communities across the globe are forming collectives and movements that resist exploitation and privatisation of production and natural resources (Federici, 2011) and try to use the natural resources in collective and sustainable ways.

In this paper, I will try to release the concept of commons and the practice of commoning from the historical and political uses of them—valuable as these are—in terms of the practices that are contributing to new ways of living together with the natural resources of the world. Instead, I wish to reconceptualise the idea of commons and the process of commoning in connection with an understanding of schooling in terms of a specific way of being together in a specific time and space as human beings as presented by Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons. Masschelein and Simons have worked to revitalise the educational vocabulary by engaging processes of schooling from the vantage point of an etymological reconstruction of the term Scholé. Here, schooling is not defined institutionally or sociologically, but through exploring certain features that function as a touchstone for what the activity of schooling is (2013, p. 30). By connecting these two specific ways of being together in the world, I hope to point to a way of conceiving of schools as common spaces—spaces that are not yet appropriated, enclosed or privatised by political and economic interests—and schooling as a process of commoning—of teaching and learning about the world in common.

By pursuing these ideas, we can begin to imagine how schools and schooling might become disentangled from the increasing political and economic pressures to increase and produce performance, learning outcomes, competences for the twenty-first century and all the other instrumental ideas that are weighing down the day-to-day practices of teachers and students in the current neoliberal educational climate. Not through a political victory over the neoliberal hegemony, a task and struggle which lies outside the bounds of education, but through exploring and experimenting in our day to day practices in schools. This however raises further questions regarding the ownership of the school. By whom and how are they to be formed, funded and sustained? Can this idea function under the control of the state (the maligned welfare state) in public schooling or are we forced to turn to privately organised and funded schooling?

In the first part of the paper, I will present the historical and present foundations and uses of the idea of commons and commoning. The second part will describe briefly idea of schooling as an activity that is not concerned with production and outcomes, but with a specific way of being together in the world. The third part of the paper tries to connect this idea with commons and commoning, while the fourth and final part for the paper discusses the abovementioned problem of ownership. The aim of the paper is thus not to present a final conceptualisation of schools as commons, but to lay the foundation for further discussion and exploration of the relevance of the idea and history of commons as spaces and commoning as a practice for ideas and theories of schooling that wish to escape the hegemony of neoliberal educational policy. In this way, the paper can be said to join in the ongoing search for new educational vocabularies that resist appropriation by marketised, instrumental and economic logics.

**Educational vocabularies and political struggles**

The question of whether true educational change begins in the political arena or in educational practices remains open. Judith Suissa has recently argued from an anarchist perspective that recent republican frameworks for education fail to see how the true struggle for liberty and non-domination in education is against capitalism (Suissa, 2018). Although sympathetic to this view, I will follow a different line of
argument in this article, even if I admittedly turn to highly political concepts. Turning to the concepts of commons and commoning from a pedagogical vantage point—as I attempt here—means to engage the concepts from the vantage point of the educator (Klafki, 1971, p. 356). The educator when engaged in the classroom is not primarily—if at all—concerned with fighting of neoliberal policy or battling capitalism. In light of this perspective, the present paper thus attempts to engage the concepts of commons and commoning in the context of the educational situation or rather the activity of schooling as proposed by Masschelein and Simons, and to scope what they might contribute to the pedagogical vocabulary available to teachers, pedagogues and others concerned with pedagogical matters. The article is thus more concerned with pedagogical theorising than with the institutional and political structures that surrounds and of course penetrate the activity of schooling. There is however, a perhaps vain hope that these theoretical reflections, when encountering the vocabulary and practices of teachers can help to reclaim a space and a way of thinking and speaking about the activity of schooling, which resists enclosure and taming. This hope is based on the idea that what we do in and how we speak about what we do in the classroom, even if it is not primarily a political activity, nevertheless can have an impact in other social or political dimensions. In the following sections, I will present the concepts of commons and commoning, and how they have been articulated thus far politically and pedagogically. I will then argue that taking a political starting point for pedagogical thinking about commons and communing leads us astray. Rather, I argue, we should engage them from a pedagogical vantage point if we want to explore how they might contribute to the activity of schooling.

Commons as spaces of collective living

The right to commoning and the establishment of the commons as a concept and space is traced back to the Magna Carta and the Charter of the Forest ratified by King John in 1215. Famous for establishing Habeas Corpus and liberties for all, the Magna Carta and the Charter of the Forest also lay out some very practical and local regulations concerning the use of natural resources and commoning. These include the right to commoning in the forests and to letting one's animals graze there. For the commoners, ‘The woodlands were a reservoir of fuel; they were a larder of delicacies; a medicine chest of simples and cures’ (Linebaugh, 2008, p. 43). The common forests thus functioned not only as a food reserve, but were literally the energy-source for all life for a very long period of human history. ‘More than any other kind of landscape they are communal places, with generations of shared natural and human history inscribed in their structures’ (Jones & Mabey, 1993; quoted in Linebaugh, 2008, p. 42). The commons are spaces, here exemplified by the English woodlands, where human beings come or reside in order to make a living. Not in terms of wealth or ownership, but in order to live off and on the land.

The right to common and to estover so important to ordinary people in the feudal society, was not based on any idea of human rights, but built on the ability to live in relation to each other and the land, established through the generations of commoners that held no title or land, but made a living out of what was common and given by the land.

First, common rights are embedded in a particular ecology with its local husbandry. For commoners, the expression ‘law of the land’ from chapter 39 does not refer to the will of the sovereign. Commoners think first not of title deeds, but of human deeds: how will this land be tilled? Does it require manuring? What grows there? They begin to explore. One might call it a natural attitude. Second, commoning is embedded in a labor process; it inheres in a particular praxis of field, upland, forest, marsh, coast. Common rights are entered into by labor. Third, commoning is collective. Fourth, being independent of the state, commoning is independent also of the temporality of the law and state. Magna Carta does not list rights, it grants perpetuities. It goes deep into human history (Linebaugh, 2008, pp. 44–45).

The idea of commons and the practice of commoning thus refer not to specific legal rights or any form of societal agreement on dispersion of production and means. Rather it is embedded in a specific human practice of collectively gathering what the land provides and sharing in the manifold tools, fodder and fuel it provides. In the following section, I will look at how these practices and common spaces have been enclosed and how this process of enclosing can be seen in the present educational landscape.
First, however let us engage how the ideas are being used and appropriated at present in the struggle against the effects of capitalism.

In leftist political theory, there has obviously long been an agreement on the fact that capitalist practices are creating inequalities and injustices across the globe, and that they are increasingly contributing to the emptying and enclosing of the planet's natural resources. The same consensus as to an alternative to capitalism has not been as evident, however. One of the alternatives, or rather modes of resistance, is the idea of commons and commoning as a way of providing local and glocal alternatives to capitalist practices. All over the world farmers, fishermen, and local communities are adopting commons and commoning as a way of finding collective and sustainable ways of producing and maintaining the means for survival and flourishing of their communities (De Angelis, 2017; Linebaugh, 2008; Means et al., 2017a). Commons also refer to the social relations and the bonds and stories we establish in our daily lives, which cannot be immediately appropriated or be considered tradeable. Commons are thus not only the material but also the immaterial effects of human activity, which capital has historically become increasingly adept at marketising. Commons and commoning in both senses are increasingly being appropriated by capital and as with the notions of a sharing economy (Airbnb, Uber, etc.), they show themselves as fully embedded in capitalist logic. The struggle for commons and commoning thus concerns not only the creation and maintenance of them, but also concerns keeping them out of the grasp of capital.

Here the challenge is how to engage in a constitutive process of new social relations, which can only be a process of commoning, able to keep at bay and push back the form of commoning predicated on capitalist relations, and therefore, capitalist value practices. One basic condition for meeting this challenge is that we face the hard reality of what we are up against, that is, capital as a social force and field of social relations that seeks to reproduce itself through boundless expansion (De Angelis, 2010, p. 956).

Commons in this view is thus inextricably linked to the struggle against capital and its exploitation, privatisation and enclosing of human existence. It concerns the way we produce the values and means necessary for survival and flourishing. This is a global struggle, which unites across national, social, ethnic and other boundaries.

Commons as social relations and as production of common values, sustenance and artefacts are created through interaction and cooperation. Commons and commoning are spaces in which to be together and ways of being together in the world, outside the realm of marketisation and ownership. They are spaces and ways of being that insist on a shared common world, which is not ours to exploit and destroy, but to protect and preserve, while living sustainably off the values it offers. Two examples of these two dimensions of commons and commoning have been receiving attention in Denmark recently. In Copenhagen, a large piece of land known as Amager Fælled (fælled means commons) has been the centre of a conflict regarding bio-diversity, common usage and ownership. As a part of the plan to finance the new metro in Copenhagen, a part of Fælleden [the commons] was promised to a development company to build a new urban neighbourhood. From the very beginning, the project met resistance on several grounds. The first being that the Fælled was common land, used and sustained by everyone, and thus could not be sold. The second argument surrounded the unique bio-diversity of the area, which was originally a beach-meadow. Eventually the protesters and the NGO's won out and new plans are being drawn up for a new location for the urban development elsewhere. This battle over common land shows how enclosure is still an ongoing process and how the fight for common spaces can still erupt even in the developed countries. The second example is a project being developed to the south of Copenhagen called Permatopia where a group of people and organisations have joined in purchasing a piece of land in order to turn it into a self-sufficient and sustainable collective with shared ownership of all resources. The project exemplifies the idea of commoning in that they strive for a collective and sustainable use of the land, where everyone shares in both the labour and the
products. These examples highlight not only the political relevance of the concepts, but also point to the two dimensions of commons; (1) commons as a shared space of experience and (2) commoning as collective and shared practices. Commoning is thus a specific way of being together in the world without claiming ownership or creating surplus values that can be sold for profit, but commoning in the leftist framework is also a constant struggle against enclosure. This tension between enclosure and commoning stands at the heart of what has been coined a move towards postcapitalism, but it is also at the heart of the struggle over education.

It must be understood that the fault lines and generative tensions of commoning and enclosing, by enabling or constraining ways of being, knowing, working, and relating, literally teach us. In this way, to suggest that commoning and enclosing are pedagogical relations is also to recognize that they are political relations—that is, the commons are always a divided and contested terrain. Ultimately, the dimensions of commoning and enclosing always harbour latent forms of potentiality. As with education itself and the inherent contingency of life in classrooms and lecture halls shared by countless students and educators, the commons can never be fully captured or enclosed (Means, Ford, & Slater, 2017b, p. 3).

Thus, in the leftist framework, education is political on the one hand in the sense of being embroiled in this struggle between commoning and enclosing, but also because education concerns the question of what kind of society we want. The question is if education can function as education in this framework or whether the critical and leftist perspective unintentionally undermines education as a common space and as a process of commoning or rather of making things common. I will return to this question below, but first let us have a look at the ways in which the idea of commons and commoning is being applied in educational theory as a starting point for critique and as a vision for education.

Commons and enclosure

Most invocations of commons as an alternative or pedagogical idea begin with a critique of educational enclosure, which often ‘takes the form of privatisation as a means of transforming K-12 and higher educational institutions and processes into potential investment opportunities and sites for profit extraction’ (Means et al., 2017b, p. 5). These forms of privatisation and enclosing of educational processes and institutions are abound in our day, and are perhaps the most pressing concern for educational theory and philosophy at the moment. The reduction of education to—individual, collective or corporate—for profit, activities reduce and instrumentalises not only at the institutional level, but also at the individual and class room level, where students (and parents) act as consumers, and teachers increasingly teach to the test in constant fear of reduction of economic resources and austerity measures. As we saw above, some see the process of commoning as educational in itself in that is teaches us something, but the idea of commons is also being employed to show how education must necessarily be central to political struggles against capital. ‘We would suggest that this implies a conceptualisation of commons that places education as central rather than as peripheral to politics, at the same time it recognises the pedagogical foundation of the common as potentiality’ (Means et al., 2017b, p. 10). What stands in the way is of course the fact that the school to a large extent has already been appropriated—if not even privatised—by neoliberalism and capital. Critical pedagogy has shown us how the school is central to the reproduction of the capitalist system and the creating of capitalist mentalities (Freire, 2003; Giroux, 1983; Illich, 1970). In light of this, Tyson Lewis has called for what he coins exopedagogy, where the school must be un-institutionalised in order to escape for profit mentality, and move itself beyond the boundaries of institutions.

In other words, I am suggesting that at this historical moment what is needed most in critical educational theory is a push toward the farthest edge of the educational imagination in order to reconceptualise ‘common education’ detached from both state control and private ownership (Lewis, 2012, pp. 852–853).
in favour of a system of education created in the common space of the multitude. Thus, liberated from state and private control, we can imagine

a truly profane institution which does not sacrifice the productive potentiality of the surplus-common for conformity to common sense (of judgment), community (distributive justice), or the profit (of privatisation), but rather increases the power of multitude to organise the surplus-common in the name of absolute democracy (Lewis, 2012, p. 859).

However, this brings us back to the question mentioned in the introduction of how schools are to be funded and run, and the question of which institutions and collectives can realistically be formed in response and resistance to capital.

[A] central problem with exopedagogy, and with left analysis and politics based on horizontalism more broadly, is that it tends to view all forms of institutional structure and authority as necessarily oppressive and not as sites that can be harnessed and reconceived for achieving broadly progressive and emancipatory aims (Means et al., 2017b, p. 12).

If we are not speaking about a public school as something that can be reclaimed, but as something that must be abandoned and replaced by exopedagogy, what then will be the basis of it, and without institutionalisation how is it to be maintained.

Masschelein and Simons (2013) have presented the concept of the taming of education, which resembles the notion of enclosure. However, they provide a wider scope where not only capital, but a variety of different religions and ideologies have attempted to tame and appropriate the school since its inception. This framework is important here because it shows how even radical and anti-capital movements risk taming the school in line with their own agendas, and because it offers a language of reclaiming the school as both public and common institution even if they do not refer to the idea of commons and commoning in their work. They do however, refer to a communistic dimension, which is different from communism as a political ideology (2013, p. 102). The communistic dimension refers to ‘the temporary state of suspension or expropriation during which, when the world is opened up, the experience of “being capable of” is made possible’ (2013, p. 102, my emphasis). Communistic thus coins a specific dimension of schooling that points to an opening of the world to the students. I will return to this dimension further on, but it is important to note how Maschelein and Simons are not speaking about the commonality of the activity of schooling from a political vantage point, but from a specifically pedagogical vantage point. ‘Communistic as referring to the radical act of de-privatisation and freeing for public use is firstly an educational rather than a political term’ (2013, p. 102). They present the school as a specific spatial and temporal constellation of student, teacher and subject matter. This framework can be put productively to work in connection with the idea of commons and commoning concerning the school; not as a political project or struggle against capital, but as an attempt to reclaim the school as a common space for studying and making things things (in) common. The main problem with the emerging commons frameworks for education and schooling is that they begin from a problematic political starting point, which means that they risk reducing educational activities to political struggle. This is as we shall see the case also for the interrelated the ideas of pedagogical commons and pedagogy in common.

**Pedagogical commons and/or pedagogy in common**

The contemporary notion of commons is often connected with democratic ideals and the struggle for ‘real’ democracy. Education and schooling in this framework is thus connected to democratic aims and democratic education. Commons is connected to democratic sociality and community, and schooling is to provide the foundation for this by forming future inhabitants of the common.

It is this fundamental social condition of interrelation, collaboration, and entanglement, which sets the parameters for any meaningful global community, that I call here the common, and it is the form of education which sets its sights on the development and democratisation of this condition, that I call pedagogy in common and ‘(p)edagogy is the indispensable condition of democracy, no less so in the current historical moment’ (De Lissovoy, 2011, pp. 1119–1120). The historical moment we are living in requires a quest for commons
and commoning and education and schooling is a societal motor in this struggle. ‘In moments of transition, education becomes a staging ground, or experimental space, for larger democratic projects’ (De Lisssovoy, 2011, p. 1126). Here schools become the instrument with which to change society. However, by wanting to *tame* the school in the image of the ideals of commons and ‘real’ democracy the project of pedagogy in common mirror the language of the neoliberal *for profit* marketisation of schools, where the language of crisis is deployed in order to align and standardise curriculum. This type of vocabulary undermines efforts to reimagine schooling as an activity, which can be kept common and apart from capital and economic/political interests. As Arendt famously warned us:

> It is in the very nature of the human condition that each new generation grows into an old world, so that to prepare a new generation for a new world can only mean that one wishes to strike from the newcomers’ hands their own chance at the new (Arendt, 2006, p. 174).

This is precisely what Masschelein and Simons reminds us with their concept of taming, and which shows the pitfalls of the attempt to use the ideas of commons and commoning in connection with schooling and education, and more specifically the notion of pedagogy in common.

One might say that the most obvious problem with the present discussions of commons in relation to education and schooling, is that they all begin from a political and ideological starting point and not from a pedagogical starting point, which sees schooling as a specific human activity. If we begin from a critique of the present political status quo and the enclosing of education that results from it—an absolutely necessary critique—we perhaps become prone to envisioning education and schooling not from a pedagogical vantage point, but from a point of resistance. From this point of resistance, we accordingly consider education and the students to be the raw material of that resistance, thus instrumentalising and politicising schooling and education. Before turning to how I imagine we begin to work with the ideas of commons and commoning from a pedagogical starting point, the idea of pedagogical commons merits attention.

In his article entitled ‘Towards an elaboration of the pedagogical common’, Gregory N. Bourassa, presents schooling in a critical pedagogical light as ‘a key space of conflict’ (Bourassa, 2017, p. 83), where the struggle over knowledge and democracy is being fought out. The school is essentially a mirror of the political struggle over ownership of the hearts and minds of its citizens. As a way of reimagining the school in line with commons, Bourassa suggests recapturing a form of the pedagogical, which resists ownership.

To be clear, the pedagogical—returned to noun form—is that which is inherited and therefore must be unveiled and attended to with responsibility. It is always already acting on us and we must constantly discern its unfolding logics and confront the ways in which they are sustained (Bourassa, 2017, p. 86).

Attending to the pedagogical thus means to be aware of the school as a social field of power struggles, and performing an analysis of this struggle, but also that by returning the pedagogical to its noun form we can reclaim it from appropriation.

It [the pedagogical] connotes a social field of constituted power. Attending to this dimension of the pedagogical allows one to retain a Marxian analysis that is necessary to identify logics of exploitation and abolish capitalist modes and hierarchies of relation. On the other hand, by jettisoning proprietary dimensions, the pedagogical is immediately relational and thus becomes a key site of the common—a collective and intersubjective site of biopolitical production (Bourassa, 2017, p. 86).

The pedagogical here thus points on the one hand to a critical dimension where we engage in revealing exploitation and hierarchies, but on the other hand it also points to a point of resistance present in the relationality and communal nature of education. ‘In dwelling in these frictions—by appreciating the indeterminacy of the pedagogical common—educators allow for forms of biopolitical production to initiate and reanimate an insurgent education and politics of transfiguration’ (Bourassa, 2017, p. 86, 90).

The pedagogical however, cannot be reduced to a social field of power over knowledge and politics. It is a specific discipline and practice concerning how human beings are formed and how they come to know about the world they live in (see Korsgaard, 2017). When we pin schooling and education down with these social and political determinations and analysis, we risk missing the central point (Mollenhauer, 2016, p. 7). Namely that schooling at one and the same time is obviously entrenched in these structures,
but at the same time continually escapes the societal determinations by creating surplus commons in the form of students being formed in unexpected ways and through the practice of bringing the world and the newcomers into presence of each other (Korsgaard, 2017; Masschelein & Simons, 2013). Something Bourassa in fact hints at towards the end of his article in a distinctly Arendtian vocabulary:

As a form of experimentation that allows something new to make an appearance, education unfolds as a process of self-valorisation in which students can violate the constituted and enclosed time, space and aims of schooling while producing a surplus common, a permanent excess that continuously escapes capitalist command and colonial logics (Bourassa, 2017, p. 91).

However, if we abandon the school entirely as in the exopedagogy framework, or if we enrol schooling in a political struggle we end up taming the very potential of schools to create surplus meaning and commons. As Bourassa reminds us, the common is both a source for and a threat to capital (Bourassa, 2017, p. 85), but so is the school in its public form. We cannot simply reduce it to a reproductive system. We must recall it also as an emancipatory institution where schooling in the sense of becoming attentive towards the world happens even in the face of blatant interference by capital. The school as public space and time is constituted by students and teachers gathering and becoming attentive towards something common, thus creating a common space in which schooling can take place. Not as reproduction and transmission, but as attention and interest, something which cannot be appropriated without rendering schooling as activity, or the pedagogical, inoperative.

**Schools as commons and common activity**

In the following, I want to present an idea of schools as commons and scholastic activities as processes of commoning, not in order to enlist schools in a struggle against capital, but because I believe, that the idea of commons can help us to reimagine schooling as a specific human activity, which cannot simply be reduced to reproduction or revolution. On the contrary, schooling is the activity, which makes it possible to both reproduce and revolutionise a society. ‘Exactly for the sake of what is new and revolutionary in every child, education must be conservative’ (Arendt, 2006, p. 189). Schooling has historically been seen as intertwined with society and as the means by which a society can be built or destroyed, or in other words; education is an instrument with which to influence society (Korsgaard, 2017, pp. 12–13). However, if we are willing for a moment to step away from this prevailing idea, a different image of the school as a specific configuration of space, people, objects and time inspired by the original meaning of the word, namely free time, can emerge.

Free time is neither leisure time, nor the time of learning, development or growth, but the time of study, thought and exercise. We could call it also the time of the gap between what is possible and what is actual, or between past and future to use the words of Arendt. From this, we can take a straightforward and preliminary articulation: Education is about making free or public time happen, to have the gap finding/taking (its) place. Or in other terms: it is about making ‘school’ in the sense of scholé. In this line, we can also state that the educator—e.g. the teacher as not only teaching but educating—is the one who leads to the school/scholé (which was the Greek meaning of the paedagogus—παιδαγωγός) and/or contributes to its happening: the architect of scholé, i.e. the one who un-finishes, who undoes the appropriation and destination of time (Masschelein, 2011, p. 530).

This idea of making free time and creating a space, which is at the same time common and public, is an inherent quality of the school, which has persisted even in the face of the many attempts to tame or enclose it. The school thus on the one hand can be seen as a common space, which resists privatisation and enclosure—and can be more or less successful in this endeavour—and on the other hand as a space, which makes something common by establishing a meeting between teacher, student and a subject matter. This conception of the school in which it is viewed not in societal, sociological, Marxist, critical or even anthropological terms, but as a specific way in which human beings can gather for a specific purpose, namely that of schooling, or more precisely study exercise and thought in relation to the world we share. This of course does not means that we should cease to analyse the role of the various forms of institutionalised schooling in our societies or that critical, sociological and other forms of analysis of this are irrelevant. Rather, drawing on Masschelein and Simons (2013), what I propose
is that we begin to speak again about what schooling is and can be, when we allow it to be imagined prior to appropriation, privatisation and enclosure.

When students and teachers gather in the classroom, they gather in order to place something in attentive focus—in order to put something on the table (Masschelein & Simons, 2015, p. 88). They gather around a shared focal point that can awaken their senses and their interest. This object or thing that is placed in attentive focus can be anything from the Battle of Little Big Horn to a mathematical equation. What constitutes the activity as an activity of schooling is that attention is focused on something we wish to explore, study and learn about, not in order to own it or be able to sell it, but in order to understand it and become acquainted with its particular form and history. In this way, the subject matter—when it enters the classroom—escapes proprietary laws. It suffers a didactical reduction, which not only liberates it from its regular function in everyday life, but also sets it free and makes it common. The school understood in such terms becomes a common space where things are made common, and studying can be conceived of as a process of commoning where knowledge and understanding is sought and shared. We plough through books and cultivate our minds not in order to enclose them or own the knowledge, and the teacher and student who shares his knowledge does not sell it or lose it when sharing, but rather turns it into something common.

The school imagined as a commons where we gather to forage, estover and produce the things that will help us to better understand and live collectively in the world we share, opens up a perspective where we can escape the proprietorian, politicised and instrumental language that haunts educational theory and philosophy. Of course, we would still need to discuss the matter of funding and maintenance of the common school. Does such a school need to be placed and run outside of the public (the state) and private domains as proposed by exopedagogy, or can they exist as state funded common spaces where the government maintain an arms length principle regarding what is to take place there? Returning to the aforementioned charter of the forest and the Magna Carta, they both stated that one might own the land, but not for that reason withhold from the commoners their rightful claim to commoning. In my view (perhaps a slightly naïve Scandinavian one), there is no reason why the state could not fund schooling and set up the appropriate systems for discussion of matters of curriculum and working conditions for teachers as well as students. The alternatives, in the form of exopedagogy or corporate and private schools, might allow for forms of commoning, but by their reliance on tuitions and philanthropy they cannot escape being exclusive, based on economic or logistical possibilities. Only a public school, in the sense of a state funded but independent entity, can realistically support the idea of schools as commons, even if this opens the discussion of the role of the state and its tendency to meddle in pedagogical and didactical matters. There are quite a few examples of schools that have carved out spaces in which to explore alternative forms of education, where the collectivity and commonality of the activity of schooling is highlighted. Obvious examples are the Summerhill and Waldorf schools that function as alternatives to ‘regular’ schooling, and although mostly private funded, they provide at least an example of how to conceive of forms of schooling that escapes appropriation and enclosure and share a focus on the commonness of the activity of schooling9 (Cooper, 2014; Dahlin, Liljeroth, & Nobel, 2006; Suissa, 2018). Other examples are the Danish free schools and the folk high schools (Coninck-Smith, Rasmussen, & Vyff, 2015; Rahbek & Möller, 2015), which are state funded but function relatively independently with alternative forms of schooling and many of them have a strong focus on commonality and collectivity. These examples are only mentioned here to emphasise that there are schools about that in various ways are at least relatively disentangled from the dominant neoliberal framework. However, the most important point is that even within public schools of various kinds we can influence our day-to-day practices and infuse them with more appropriate vocabularies than the ones on offer in the standardisation agenda. Here, the concepts of commons and communing offer themselves as intriguing ways of conceptualising the collective or communistic dimension of the activity of schooling.
Concluding remarks

In a series of personal reflections on a lifetime of teaching, Daniel Pennac describes how over time he came to see the central task of the teacher to be one of drawing his students into the present moment. One example is a recollection of how when encountering a student exclaiming ‘I’ll never get there’, Pennac used this rather glum statement as an entry into a discussion of grammar.

Hence the teacher in me decided to use parsing to bring them here, now, in order to experience the singular thrill of understanding the purpose of adverbial pronouns, essential words we use a thousand times a day without having to think about it. It’s a complete waste of energy, when faced with this angry student, to get lost in moral or psychological arguments; this is not a time for debate, but a time for action (Pennac, 2010, p. 97).

What Pennac is describing here is a pedagogical form of action, which is not so much concerned with changing the psychological, social or economic conditions of his students, but rather he is concerned with providing them with a scholastic experience. This experience is concerned with being collectively engaged with something common, in this case French grammar. These scholastic moments do not arise as consequences of educational policy, or through a political agenda on the part of the teacher, but are embedded and always potentially present in their practices as educators. This moment can occur and is potentially present when the classroom door has shut and the students are invited to leave their primary life-worlds and enter the common space of the scholastic experience (Masscheleien & Simons, 2013, p. 38). These experiences are not directed by or towards the lifeworld and political action, but towards attention and understanding of what is common, and what can be made common in these moments. This understanding of schooling as a specific experience differs of course from the usual sociological and critical definitions of what goes on in the classroom. It points to a way of conceiving of the task of the teacher and the role of education, where political struggle is not of primary concern but in effect ‘must wait’ until we are finished with the activity of schooling.

The idea that schools can be seen as inherently concerned with the common, and with studying and collecting that which is common to us at the very least opens a space where we could begin to disengage from the discussions of what the school is to provide society with in terms of political change, competences, learning outcomes and so on. With this perspective, we can begin to speak instead of how we provide our students with experiences in common, and with being a part of collectively establishing a shared scholastic space, a space in which we can forage in the common vocabularies, objects and histories of human existence and attempt to reimagine them. Not with the direct aim of changing the world, but always with the hope that the new generation will be willing to engage in the process of renewal once the bell has rung and schooling has ended.

Notes

1. e.g. Means, Ford, & Slater, 2017a; De Lissovoy, Means, & Saltman, 2015.
2. Pieces of wood and other means of sustenance found on the ground in the forest.
3. As proposed by feminist thinker Silvia Federici (2004, 2011) who argues for the day to day labour of men and women to reclaim commons and reproduction as continual struggles. However, the present paper is not a political paper, but rather a pedagogical and theoretical exploration of the concept of commons and what it might offer our educational imagination in relation to questions of collectively and collaboration in schools. See pages 8–9 for an elaboration of this point.
4. Social networks such as Facebook and Twitter exemplify how even our social interactions are being marketised and capitalised.
7. I have chosen these examples in order to show how commons and commoning is not something that is relevant only in the underdeveloped countries (the global south), but is highly relevant even in developed countries in the north. For examples of struggles over the commons in the global south, see De Angelis, 2017.
8. A similar critique of Hardt and Negri’s work has been put forth by Chantal Mouffe (2013) and David Harvey (2013).
9. By this I do not mean to imply that Summerhill and Wahldorf schools are examples of schools that ‘live out’ commons and work with communing, but rather that even in their difference they contain elements of how one might begin to work with the concepts, and that they have established alternative forms of schooling.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Morten Timmermann Korsgaard (PhD) is a senior lecturer at the University of Malmö and part of the research group Philosophical Studies of Education. He works primarily in Philosophy of education, Educational theory and Inclusive education.

References