

IN MEMORIAM

Michael Newman (1939-2025)

**From Labour Education to Teaching Defiance and
Teaching Agonism in Polarised Times**

Rick Flowers

University of Technology Sydney

Michael Newman was teacher, writer, mentor, colleague, and, in the fullest sense, a public intellectual. He came of age intellectually in the traditions of radical adult education and critical theory, shaped by Paulo Freire and by the Frankfurt School. He belonged to a remarkable generation of scholars – including Jack Mezirow, Griff Foley, Mechtild Hart, Jane Thompson, Shirley Walters, Astrid von Kotze, Linda Cooper, Stephen Brookfield, and Bud Hall – who took adult education seriously as a political, ethical, and cultural project. For this generation, adult education was never merely about skills or credentials. It was about democracy, power, dignity, and people’s capacity to understand and shape their own lives.

Throughout his career, Michael returned to a deceptively simple question: what does it mean to teach adults well – and courageously – in difficult times? Not how to manage people, not how to measure them, and not how to keep them compliant, but how to support learning that is honest, critical, and ethically grounded. For Mike, teaching was always a moral and democratic practice, sustained through reflection, dialogue, and a principled resistance to intellectual and political fashions.

Seen in retrospect, Michael’s intellectual life can be understood as unfolding across three major political eras. His books, articles, and institutional work do not merely respond to these eras; they help us understand how democratic education might persist through them.

First Era: Labour, Collective Politics and Democratic Education

Michael's formative intellectual and professional years unfolded during the heyday of organised labour and collective working-class politics. This was a period when trade unions, mass membership organisations, and community associations still provided relatively stable infrastructures for political education and collective learning. His early publications, including *Adult Education and Community Action* (1975) and *The Poor Cousin: A Study of Adult Education* (1979), already reflected this context. In these works, Michael examined the marginal status of adult education within formal systems while insisting on its democratic potential. Learning, he argued, was inseparable from participation, collective agency, and social purpose.

This orientation deepened through his extensive involvement in union education. As a National Trainer at the Clyde Cameron College in Albury-Wodonga, part of the Trade Union Training Authority, and through his work with unions in Australia and South Africa, Michael became immersed in traditions of labour education that treated learning as a form of political formation. These experiences culminated in *The Third Contract: Theory and Practice in Trade Union Training* (1993). The book offered a theoretically informed and empirically grounded account of union education as collective learning, organisational development, and democratic practice. It situated education within struggles over power, representation, and institutional authority. The award of the Cyril O. Houle Award for this work signalled international recognition of Michael's ability to connect scholarship with movement practice.

During this first era, Michael's work assumed that adult education was embedded in relatively durable collective structures. Although he was never naïve about internal conflicts and compromises, there was still a sense that political education operated within recognisable organisational worlds.

Second Era: New Social Movements and Plural Politics

From the 1970s onwards, Michael's work increasingly engaged with the rise of new social movements: feminism, environmentalism, Indigenous rights, peace activism, and community organising. These movements were more decentralised, culturally oriented, and internally diverse than earlier labour struggles. They foregrounded identity, recognition, and difference alongside class and material interests. Michael did not retreat into nostalgia for earlier political forms. Instead, he took these movements seriously as sites of learning, experimentation, and ethical struggle. His book *Defining the Enemy: Adult*

Education in Social Action (1994) exemplifies this phase. Here, he examined how educators engage with conflict, power, and political struggle across diverse movements. He analysed how “enemies” are named, constructed, and contested, and how education operates within morally ambiguous political terrain. The book was neither a manual for mobilisation nor a romantic celebration of activism. It was a reflective and ethically attentive analysis of political education in contested contexts. Its second Cyril O. Houle Award reflected its significance for the field.

Around the same time, Michael broadened his intellectual register through *Maeler’s Regard: Images of Adult Learning* (1999). Drawing on literature and philosophy, this book explored learning as a relational, interpretive, and ethical process. Rather than abandoning politics, Michael expanded his understanding of how adults make meaning through narrative, imagination, and attentiveness to experience. It reflected his growing interest in the moral and existential dimensions of learning.

Institutionally, this second era was reflected in his work at UTS and through the Centre for Popular Education. He convened multi-day seminars that brought together figures such as Jane Thompson, Mechtild Hart, and Jack Mezirow for sustained collective reflection. These were slow, demanding, generous intellectual spaces that resisted academic acceleration. Through the Centre, Michael also worked closely with emerging movement organisations. We ran workshops in Redfern, an inner-Sydney suburb shaped by working-class histories, long-standing Aboriginal communities, and intensifying gentrification. These workshops addressed real tensions over housing, identity, development, and belonging. They exemplified Michael’s commitment to democratic dialogue across difference. We also co-led workshops for environmental organisations including The Wilderness Society, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, and the Australian Conservation Foundation. One memorable series was held at the home of Peter Garrett – lead singer of Midnight Oil and long-time ACF chair – in Mittagong. Sitting in a living room, drinking tea, talking about movements, learning, and power, captured Michael’s style: informal, serious, relational, and intellectually rigorous.

Teaching under Constraint: *Teaching Defiance*

This second era culminated in *Teaching Defiance: Stories and Strategies for Activist Educators* (2006), written against the backdrop of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the global “War on Terror,” and intensifying neoliberal restructuring of education. The book gathered stories of educators who continued to teach critically under institutional pressure. It foregrounded fear, doubt,

compromise, and persistence. It resisted heroic narratives, insisting instead on moral responsibility under constraint. In many respects, *Teaching Defiance* functions as Michael's intellectual autobiography: a lifetime reflection on what it means to remain ethically committed in difficult times.

At the same time, Michael continued to provoke scholarly debate. His article *Calling Transformative Learning into Question: Some Mutinous Thoughts* (2012) challenged the increasingly orthodox and individualised character of transformative learning theory. Responses by John Dirkx, Patricia Cranton, and Elizabeth Kasl, followed by Michael's own concluding reflections, exemplified his role in sustaining serious intellectual dialogue through *Adult Education Quarterly*. He returned to these debates in *Transformative Learning: Mutinous Thoughts Revisited* (2014), reaffirming the need for socially grounded learning theory.

Across these interventions, Michael consistently resisted managerial, technocratic, and fashionable abstractions. He sought to reconnect educational concepts to social, ethical, and political realities.

Third Era: Fragmentation, Platforms and Polarisation

Since the publication of *Teaching Defiance*, the landscape of citizenship, activism, and public learning has changed profoundly. Political identities have hardened. Digital platforms shape public debate. Misinformation circulates at scale. The boundaries between left and right activism have blurred. The language of resistance is now claimed across the political spectrum. Collective movements still exist, but they are more unstable, networked, and vulnerable to internal fracture and external manipulation. Activism is increasingly shaped by affective online communities rather than durable organisations. Educators now work in environments marked by distrust, grievance politics, and fragile civic cultures. Under these conditions, traditional models of critical pedagogy and movement-based education face new limits. Fact-checking and debunking are necessary but often insufficient. Direct correction can deepen defensiveness. Evidence becomes an identity marker. Moral urgency can be read as moral arrogance. Michael did not live to write a major book directly addressing this era. Yet his later work anticipates many of its dilemmas. His emphasis on ethical responsibility, critical dialogue, and moral courage under pressure speaks directly to contemporary conditions. It is in this context that my own recent work on agonism has emerged.

Agonism, associated especially with Chantal Mouffe, is not antagonism. It does not seek to destroy opponents. It seeks to transform enemies into adversaries:

people with whom we disagree profoundly but still recognise as legitimate participants in democratic life. Agonistic education aims to sustain disagreement without demonisation, conflict without humiliation, and critique without contempt. It focuses on understanding how strongly held views arise, what fears and identities sustain them, and how dialogue might enable movement without coercion. Rather than asking only who is wrong, it asks why positions become compelling in the first place. Why do some people become misogynistic, climate sceptical, or conspiratorial? Why do others become feminists, climate activists, or anti-racist advocates? How do belonging, recognition, and moral injury shape political learning?

My recent work – including *Challenging Hateful Misinformation*, *Beyond Moral Panic*, *Citizenship in the Age of AI*, and *Discomfort, Dissent and Deliberation* – extends Michael’s project into this third era. It seeks to think pedagogically within fragmented platform politics while remaining faithful to his ethical commitments. In many ways, my recent body of work represents not a departure from Michael’s legacy, but its renewal. I believe he would have adapted. He would not have abandoned defiance. He would have insisted that courage today sometimes means staying in difficult conversations, that resistance sometimes means listening, and that naming power must be accompanied by creating spaces where people can change without humiliation.

Mentorship, integrity and Legacy

After Griff Foley, Michael became my doctoral supervisor. He read my work with meticulous care, using pencils. His annotations were acts of attention. They said: this matters, and you matter. He helped me see that scholarship was an ethical practice.

Michael believed deeply in the circulation of ideas. Long before open access became fashionable, he made his work freely available. He chose to self-publish to retain accessibility and control. He valued recognition because he wanted ideas to matter, not because he sought prestige. His two Cyril Houle Awards and the inaugural UTS Social Justice Award reflect both scholarly impact and ethical commitment.

Beyond ideas, we remember the person: the quiet humour, the careful phrasing, the thoughtful pauses, the short sentences and chapters, the sense that he was always thinking one step deeper without needing to display it.

He showed us that scholarship can be rigorous without being cold, political without being dogmatic, critical without being cruel.

For me, he strengthened the joy and reward I found in this field. That is an extraordinary gift.

We miss the corridor conversations and phone calls. But we carry him with us – in our classrooms, our writing, our thinking, and our attempts, however imperfect, to work democratically with others.

Good on yer, Mike