Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences and sciences. In this space we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Cathy Ann Davidson is a distinguished professor of English and founding director of the futures initiative at the Graduate Center CUNY, author of the award winning book, The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux, Basic Books 2017. Davidson, an engaged advocate for universities and disadvantaged students leans forward on urging higher education to innovate itself in an ever changing world by becoming activists. Professor Davidson, welcome to the Thought Project Podcast.

Tanya Domi: This is exciting. I've been anticipating your participation. So on this great day, congratulations to you on receiving the Frederic W. Ness Book Award from the Association of American Colleges and Universities for your critically acclaimed book The New Education, How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux.

Cathy Ann D.: Thank you. It's great to be here.

Tanya Domi: Thank you. I'm so honored and delighted by that award.

Cathy Ann D.: It's a very, very wonderful award because it's from your peers and it's really acknowledging the ideas that really animate New Education.

Tanya Domi: Yes. And AACNU is an organization dedicated to making education is good as it can be and so that my peers recognize the book for that is not only an honor, it's really inspiring that people are embracing this whole mission to change education.

Cathy Ann D.: And I think that the association is simply an explanation point following a series of reviews that were just absolutely off the charts. Really, really, you get across the board really incredible endorsements for the book.

Tanya Domi: People have been really kind. It's been fantastic and I think it's really not about the book. It's about a sense that we have to change higher education and one thing I do in the book is I profile truly inspiring, hardworking people from the Ivy Leagues down to community colleges who are doing a lot to make changes. And I think that's probably what people cathect on, is this sense that there are people working really, really hard to do some good work in higher education.

Cathy Ann D.: So you claim in New Education that to make real change in higher ed, everyone has to be an activist, and yet, these soaring accolades and all the work and all the ideas, there seems to be a crisis today in higher education. So are there not enough activists? Because it does seem like even today, this morning I opened
up the Chronicle of Higher Ed and I see an article about naming of a school at Simmons University after Gwen Ifill and the person named to be dean was a white man. And this is the kind of thing that just, with this new generation of young people going to school, they just see it as being hypocrisy. People, students, they're calling you on your stuff, basically.

Cathy Ann D.: I'm glad I dedicate the book to the millennials and other younger generations who I think have been much maligned. People love to talk about students today being coddled. I actually think students today are ... I've been teaching many decades and it's the greatest generation of students I've ever taught and I think you're right, students do want more. One of the reasons is they're having to pay so much. I mean higher education costs a lot. Another reason is because they don't know what world they're being prepared for.

The educational system we've inherited was designed in the late 19th century and now we're in a world where there's full employment but also full underemployment. There's never been ... even in the great gilded age, there was never a bigger disparity between the rich and the poor. There were never so many jobs, such a proportionate number of professional college educated jobs that pay almost below the the minimum wages, and minimum wages of a while ago. So on the one hand there's anger. On the other hand, people are urgently awaiting change and want change to happen now.

Tanya Domi: So you talk about cost. In the US economy, we're looking at over $1.44 billion in student debt.


Tanya Domi: It's the biggest debt in history. And we're looking at access too. Access, because if people can't pay, then they can't have access. You combine that with some of the ethical challenges that you see facing universities like the Michigan State sex scandal. They're doing a payout to victims of $500 million. You're looking at Penn state, you're looking at sexual assault on campus. You're looking at racism, all these allegations, and of course you're making a really excellent point [inaudible 00:06:12] our colleague like Paul Krugman and people at the Stone Center talking about income inequality. All of these factors compound the crisis and now there is a right wing meme, "Who needs to go to college? You don't need college now."

Cathy Ann D.: 97% of all new jobs last year went to people with college degrees or some kind of post high school credentialing, so when the right wing says you don't need college, they're not talking about their kids. In fact, I've never, never met a wealthy pundit who talks about "We don't need college today" who's sanguine about their own kid saying, "Hey dad, we don't need college today, so I'm not going to college." Doesn't happen.
People are more obsessed with getting their kids into the best college than ever. At the same time, they're saying to the general population, you don't need college. That's really a justification for not supporting college. They're not saying you don't need college. They're saying, "We don't want our taxes to go to college. We want lower taxes so we can get even richer. We want more income inequality."

The other thing is there is a horrible amount of scandal in higher education because higher education is the world. Higher education is the society. So many problems we think of as higher education problems are exact mirrors, almost a Petri dish for the biggest problems in society. Sexual harassment, maybe not confined just to the Supreme Court these days. Maybe also confined to college as well.

Tanya Domi: I agree with you. I mean, you look at the military, it's the same issue that it reflects broader social inequities and the phenomenon of the entire society itself.

Cathy Ann D.: Absolutely, absolutely.

Tanya Domi: That gets out-pictured in the institutions without a doubt.

Cathy Ann D.: And doesn't let higher education off the hook. In other words, if higher education takes its activism seriously, it should not only be a Petri dish that shows and exposes social ills, but finds reasons and ways of repairing and remedying those social ills. That's what college should be for.

Tanya Domi: So you came to the Graduate Center in 2014 from Duke University where you're innovating there as well, which you've been doing your entire career. You established Haystack. You did some really innovative work with Melissa Gates who was on the board of trustees at Duke. You were known for that. You were appointed to the humanities board by President Obama. I mean, you've always been leaning forward, Cathy, so you came here with this idea that the former president, Bill Kelly, worked with you on and you have established and you are the founding director of the Futures Initiative.

You leveraged Haystack into this project and is this ... This seems to me as an outsider, knowing the work of the Futures Initiative, that this is really your incubator for new ideas fueled by you and your team and you were funded by Melon Grant in this partnership with LaGuardia Community College. Why don't we tell our listeners what you're doing in this just really cool, leaning forward initiative.

Cathy Ann D.: Thank you. I love it and no matter how depressed I get about politics, when I walk into our weekly seminars with our Futures Initiative fellows, I feel like the world is gonna be okay. These are passionate young graduate students in that program. The basic idea of the Futures Initiative is based on the structure of
CUNY, which is ... There's a graduate center, but students on our most prestigious fellowships who are working with the some of the most famous people in their field and working on their coursework and their dissertations, are also teaching 200,000 undergraduates a year out at the 24 CUNY campuses. When I came here, there was a kind of a donut. There was a hole. There was teaching and there was research, but there was no connection and everything we know about teaching introductory classes is that you're more likely to go into a field if you're taught by a near peer, by a graduate student, than by some senior professors.

So the role of a graduate student teaching an introductory course is crucial. The first level of what our program does is teaches graduate students how to take their most cutting edge, their most urgent, their most important research and translate that into introductory classes often for students who live below the poverty line. At some of our campuses, 70% of the students have family incomes less than $25,000 a year, often first generation Americans, often first generation college students, but they're not getting secondhand or watered down. They're getting the most exciting scholarship that's happening now. What I find is, and what we found over and over is these same students when they learn how to teach in active, engaged ways and get things back from their undergraduate students that energy and often a real commitment to a more equitable society turns out to influence their own dissertation work. So there's a wonderful feedback loop.

We also teach students how to teach not just for replications of themselves. Often are graduate students come themselves from some pretty elite and illustrious institutions, but how to teach students who may not have academic grounding. He may not even know what graduate student school is. So we invite our graduate students to invite their most successful undergraduates become peer leaders and peer mentors, come from all over CUNY. We choose students from all over CUNY to come to the Graduate Center and learn about professional education, about their own professional lives and how to be leaders and again, near peers and mentors to students who are similar to themselves at their campuses, but who might be struggling.

So there's this incredible reciprocity of learning and teaching, teaching and learning, mentoring and learning, becoming a leader, but becoming a leader in a member, not apart from your community, but so that the whole community gets better.

Tanya Domi: So it's really empowering.

Cathy Ann D.: Totally empowering. It's an idea of student centered education that's not only about content, but how you can think about what from that content gives me a tool to deal with the complexity of the life I lead outside of the classroom and beyond that classroom.
Tanya Domi: So as we know in CUNY education, we know that as you just aptly described, we have students from all different walks of life. That could be first generation, it could be a child of an immigrant. They walk in and they have a different level of education, but if they enter into the futures initiative, it seems like it's a leveling up. It's almost like a leveling up.

Cathy Ann D.: It is. It's an incredible leveling up. When we hold our leadership institute, for example, that's directed by my colleague Lauren Melendez, who herself went to Lehman College and is from the South Bronx. We have students in one day say "This changed my life," and this year I said to students, "I keep hearing this to this day changed your life. What does that mean?" And one of the students said, "You don't understand, in my whole life, nobody in a position of authority has selected me for my qualities to be a leader." And then you could just see that this young man was standing taller and prouder and said, "I take this very seriously." There's nothing I could have said that would have made him take more seriously the honor that he felt had been conferred upon him because a graduate student who taught his introductory class saw something special in him. That's an amazing gift to his family, to his community, to everybody.

Tanya Domi: That's a great story. That's just an amazing story because you can see the physical change, I think, in students, right?

Cathy Ann D.: Absolutely.

Tanya Domi: Because it's special. Most of the time people are in the South Bronx, they are dreading going to school or dragging themselves through school. So that's really, really a great story. Also, I'm not trying to go back to the book, but did the Futures Initiative ... Did it inform your thinking? I mean, I would imagine it did in some ways.

Cathy Ann D.: So when I taught at Duke, I was known for being a passionate advocate for public education, but people would always say to me, "Yeah, you went to CUNY Binghamton and you taught at Michigan State for years, but you've spent most of your career to very elite private school. You can't really know what public education is." And I knew all the statistics. I knew all the numbers. I know I was a passionate advocate, but it was only when I started coming to CUNY that I thought, "They're right. You can't really know the hardship our students and our faculty are under at a public university when you live in what one of my former students describes as the velvet tunnel of elite America." The velvet tunnel is a wonderful image for this world where you think you know the world and the world you think you know is pretty soft and cushy so you don't really get outside of it, but you don't know the world. You know, this very protected version of a world.

This is true absolutely of my Duke students and colleagues. They worked like dogs. The students I worked with there were wonderful. They worked very hard. That's different than being wonderful and working very hard, and when you
leave my class, you go to your job at 4:00 in the afternoon and work til midnight as an EMT, as one of my students is an EMT professional and you write your papers on your cell phone in the ambulance. Not when there's a patient in the ambulance, she assures me, but in the ambulance because that's a place where she could get bandwidth.

Tanya Domi: Wow.

Cathy Ann D.: Yes, this was a student. It's a great story. It's a student who was an A plus plus student in class and her papers were kind of B student papers. I was like, "What's going on? Your papers when you write them at home aren't so good." She's like, "Well, I can only write when we go to pick somebody up in the ambulance. Once we have somebody in, I can't, and sometimes ..."

I'm like, "Oh my goodness, you're writing research papers on your cell phone at your job from 4:00 till midnight?" It was humbling. It's like you should win the Nobel prize for studentship. That's astonishing to me that you succeed against those odds. You can't even imagine those odds when you don't teach at a place like CUNY. I had somebody say to me recently, "Gosh, these young people who are delivering stuff at all hours of day or night, how could they ever go to school or make anything of themselves?" I said, actually almost all of my students and one of my classes say they make money as delivery people and they're out delivering all night and they're in my classes on time the next day with their assignments done. I mean they are living 24/7 lives where they're either working or in school, raising families, taking care of elderly parents, grandparents, 24/7. That is the life of a CUNY student.

Tanya Domi: So the idea that when we were growing up and maybe not so long ago that you would graduate from high school and you'd go to college full time and you know, you would go off into the world and get your first job. That is just not the reality as much these days, especially with CUNY in an urban based university. People cannot ... They can't afford it. They have to support themselves.

Cathy Ann D.: Absolutely. Almost 50% of college students now go to community college.

Tanya Domi: Okay.

Cathy Ann D.: About 40% work full time and about 30% work full time and go to school full time. That's just mind boggling that you are a full time student while you're also a full time worker. Often the full time work is 40 hours a week, but not at a full time job. You're working two or three jobs at minimum wage. It's rushing to your classrooms, rushing back, and again, having other family responsibilities at the same time. It's a very different world, only ... Most books about higher education, and this goes back to your question about my book, The New Education. Most books about higher education are written for the .4%, .4% ...
... Of students who go to what are called the Ivies plus, the Ivy Leagues, plus Stanford, Chicago, Hopkins, Duke. Those other very, very, very elite schools. .4%, so all the trash, and it just infuriates me about coddled youth, is based on this tiny percentage. If you're riding your bike delivering food or newspapers at 4:00 in the morning, you are not a coddled youth. I'm sorry. You are a tough student warrior out there working for your education and fighting for an education.

Tanya Domi: Being very resourceful. Wow, that's such a juxtaposition. I mean, I, myself personally, did public education in college. I got the GI bill, went back and finished, but I went to an Ivy League school uptown for my masters because I thought, well, I'm going to make a point with this master so you know that I'm for real. It's recognized, so I don't have to explain anything when I walk in and say I went to Columbia University. Sort of that kind of approach, but that just ... I had the resources and the know how to do that, but a lot of these young people have to find their way on their own. Of course I did too, but now we're talking about first generation, where in this city, you're first generation because your parents came here from another country and you're the child of a first generation family and you have to negotiate the world for your parents. That's many times the case here in CUNY.

Cathy Ann D.: Absolutely. One thing I do often in my classes is I pay attention to the fact that the graduate students I'm teaching our teachers and I have them think about what they can do in the classes they're teaching that make their students, these are the undergraduate students, immediately relevant to their communities. One of the most wonderful things I ever had with an art history student who ... She was teaching 20th century art history at Brooklyn College and she had her students find out ... They had to do research to find out every free art event that was available in the borough of Brooklyn that semester. They made handbills, very adorable, brightly colored artistic handbills in Mandarin, in Spanish, in Korean, in Arabic and in various other languages, and put them in the strategic places around town.

They held office hours for people and she gave extra credit for bringing five people who had never, ever been to an art museum into the Brooklyn Museum where we were offered an ability to come free, not just at the student time, but ... Maybe it's ... I think they could bring anyone in free as part of this program.

Tanya Domi: To BAM, yeah. Great museum. Great Museum

Cathy Ann D.: These young people in her class ended up bringing in their grandmothers. There were more grandmothers probably in the Brooklyn Museum that semester than ever before. The pride of these grandmothers, mostly immigrants, being in a museum with their grandchild who was a college student ... You know, the walls could have burst off that museum. The sense of pride was incredible but it was also a way of teaching those students that what they were learning in their classroom that semester with taxpayers' money had real benefit back to the
community they were living in. Not at some future time, not if they're professors, but right now, they had knowledge. They were docents, docents from the grandkids. It happened to be when the Kehinde Wiley exhibit was on the Brooklyn Museum.

He's a famous African American artists who pictures street people in paintings done with meticulous, realistic detail based on old master paintings. So there's something that looks like it should be Rembrandt but it's [crosstalk 00:22:35] ...

Tanya Domi: I've seen pictures, yes, of the work.

Cathy Ann D.: The grandparents and the kids were ... the students were posing in these heroic poses in front of these grand heroic paintings. You know, you just thought, "That's CUNY, that's CUNY."

Tanya Domi: That's very inspiring. So I don't want to diminish something that our listeners should know about you. One is that you're prolific. You've written more than 20 books, one, and two, to your great credit, and I'm a great champion of you for this reason, you weigh in on these issues on op ed pages, on our nation's op ed pages, and one of my great lamentations is that we need more Cathy Davidsons, but there are not enough women in the academy doing this. There's a gap in the academy just as there is at large in our society where there are fewer women, op ed writers, there are fewer women columnists and you are taking your role as a public intellectual quite seriously. I would call you a quintessential public intellectual, and today, if you're not weighing in, you're missing a great opportunity because there's so many different platforms in the way you can participate in the public square.

Why don't you talk about, you know, how you go about that and why you've really leveraged it. I mean, of course haystack is part of that, but more broadly, I'd like to hear your thoughts.

Cathy Ann D.: Thank you. First of all, I'm honored that you say that because I take my role as a public intellectual, as an extension of my life as a teacher and scholar, and I personally take it as an obligation, but I also know not everybody is good at journalistic writing. I was trained as a journalist. Then it was a playwright for a while and then sort of stumbled into academe, and have written a lot of academic books, but I've always alternated academic writing with nonacademic writing because I want not to lose the talent of being able to present something to somebody who doesn't know your punchline.

One thing about academic writing, I don't even care about the jargon and other things. If you're writing for a community that shares your assumptions, they either know your punchline is going to say yes, no, or somewhere in between, but they know what the parameters are. When you're writing an op ed, you're writing for readers who don't share that, who don't know what the parameters are, who don't know where you're going to fall down on a pre-defined issue.
You have to define the issue. You also have to define the suspense. It's almost like a novel when you're writing an op ed piece where you have to do something that engages the reader, connects with the reader, and then brings them home to a conclusion so that they're not just following the conclusion, but they're saying, "Wow, that's a good point. Yeah." You're changing a mind. You're appealing to somebody in a different level.

I write dozens of drafts of everything I publish. I'm now writing science fiction, my first science fiction novel and I'm on complete draft four and there'll probably be five more drafts before I even send it off to my agent, but that's partly because each draft, I'm trying to get it more and more and more accessible to a wider audience. That's two things. One, I was trained as a journalist, so who, what, where, why, when, and how are like in my brain for everything I do.

Tanya Domi: Right, of course.

Cathy Ann D.: Two, it's a commitment of mine, so I've really made a skill and learned a skill. I go to writing groups. I love editors. I sometimes hire editors just to have somebody who doesn't know my work, give me an objective opinion about it, get feedback to it, but it's a real commitment for me. It doesn't happen by accident. I have great, great respect for professional journalists who do this everyday because it's a difficult act to take something complex, make it seem not simple ... You don't want to lose the complexity, but make it seem clear ...

Tanya Domi: And accessible, yes.

Cathy Ann D.: Accessible and persuasive.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, I agree. I think that people in the academy, if they can cross over and explain their scholarly research in a way that's accessible, they can really persuade and shift public opinion. I mean, I've seen it. I mean, you look at our colleague, for example, Paul Krugman, who's probably the most visible public intellectual in the world ...

Cathy Ann D.: Definitely.

Tanya Domi: ... Given he's got a New York Times column. He's talking about complex ideas about economics every day and how that informs our body politic, how it affects our day to day life and what it really means in terms of our values and our priorities. That's really powerful but I think that your work on education, making it accessible to a broader audience, leveling everybody up, is so important in this moment where we see really a technological revolution that does not have the benefit of the industrial revolution, which created a lot of jobs. This one is actually eliminating a lot of jobs. And so we're in this period where, where are we going and what are we doing? But, the fact that you're weighing in on it, on the revolution, I might add, you are weighing in on that.
Cathy Ann D.: Right, and the industrial revolution exploited people for a long time before workers organized and fought back. The movement ...

Tanya Domi: The labor movement, yes.

Cathy Ann D.: The union movement, the labor movement was because of the exploitation. First of all, we're seeing the worst monopolization of industries that we've literally ever seen. I mean, we're going back to the Middle Ages and the great kings and queens in the Middle Ages in terms of the amount of resources per capita and percentage-wise by the leaders of the modern technology revolution.

Tanya Domi: Right, the moguls.

Cathy Ann D.: All of those rules that were carefully built over the 20th century and the 21st century to prevent monopolization have pretty much been been rendered ineffective. So we have to change those laws and we have to think about the economy. I mean, you cannot have people living below the poverty line when they're doing things like teaching. Right now we have some form of a teacher shortage in 50 out of 50 states and in most of the 50 states, teachers wages are still barely above the poverty poverty line.

Tanya Domi: That's a really good point. So speaking of that, what is on the horizon in your view? You're talking about these problems and these are major, major problems. What in terms of education do you see on the horizon? You're a big thinker. You visualize big. You were handing out iPods to freshman in college at Duke with your friend Melissa Gates and I mean that seems like 100 years ago, iPods, but now we're at this end where people learn more, consume more information on a daily basis, and yet it seems like the bottom has fallen out of the job market as you aptly described.

Cathy Ann D.: Right [crosstalk 00:30:11] ... We have almost 100% employment now and we have terrible, terrible underemployment and I think it is going to take a labor movement, the equivalent of the 19th century, to really remember ... I mean, for right now, for example, Amazon workers protested this week and Amazon announced quite grandly that they're now going to go to a 15 an hour hourly wage. Well, they acted as if that was some kind of largesse. No, there were worker protests all over the country and we're going to need that. We're going to need organized, consistent, thoughtful pushing back.

Tanya Domi: So how does education inform that movement? Do you think-

Cathy Ann D.: Yes, education is crucial to that and I think that's one of the reasons why there are right wingers who say you don't need a college education. Education helps students to see this situation is not a normal situation. The monopolization of capital that we're in now, this extraordinary debt that we're amassing in order that there can be tax cuts for the very, very rich, this moment of underemployment, extreme underemployment is not typical. It's typical of the
Middle Ages. It's typical of the worst extremes of the industrial age, but this is a reversal of at least 70 years of labor and social policy, and knowing that factual information gives people a handle to think about what can change. I think when you believe it's just the way things are, it is what it is, you don't change.

You need to know this is wrong, this is bad, this is evil, this is harmful, and then you can start organizing to make something better and make some kind of change. Knowledge is power. Knowledge is power.

Tanya Domi: Knowledge is power and informed knowledge is probably more power. Cathy Davidson, writer of The New Education. Award winning, critically acclaimed, a stellar contributor here at the Graduate Center. Thank you for being with us today.

Cathy Ann D.: It's been my pleasure and my honor. Thank you so much, Tanya.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project and thanks to our guest, distinguished professor Cathy Davidson of the Graduate Center CUNY.

The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.