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****** Our thanks to the cadre of scholars who serve as reviewers without whose services the journal could not exist.

Critical Questions In Education: Volume 1, Issue 2

The Academy for Educational Studies
Missouri State University
Springfield, Missouri

July 15, 2010

Dearest Colleagues:

At the last writing, I was freezing my you-know-what off in the tundra of the Midwest (along with many/most of our Academy friends) in one of the coldest winters on record...now I long for some of that cool, cool weather as we endure one of the hottest and wettest summers in recent memory. However, nothing can dampen my excitement in presenting this, our second issue, of *Critical Questions in Education*. Certainly any first issue, of anything (children, for example), is a reason to celebrate; on the other hand, a second issue might be even more exciting because it indicates growth, the beginning of a legacy, and, maybe most importantly, some momentum.

This little journal of ours has momentum.

Steve Jones and I have talked interminably about our vision for the journal specifically as well as the Academy more generally and some of those discussions about the journal have revolved around questions of a regularly changing journal theme; you might remember that the first issue was oriented around the general notion of spirituality in education—a theme consciously chosen. Call it divine intervention or just dumb luck, but this issue has organized itself as a precursor to the Academy's upcoming conference question in Chicago: "How should teachers be prepared?"

In this second issue of volume one, you will find a compelling history of New College, at Teacher's College, Columbia, in the decade of the 1930s—a period strangely reminiscent of today; and, one that Sonia Murrow of Brooklyn College, CUNY, suggests has serious implications for current teacher preparation programs. Dave S. Knowlton of Southern Illinois Edwardsville argues that university teachers might be well served in constructing an unconventional classroom milieu that minimizes typical grading schemes, invites spirituality into the classroom, and allows students to authentically participate in their own education. Based on the work of Stephen Covey, Dave's suggestions might well impact our teachers in the trenches of both private and public Pre K-12 schools, as well as university teaching.

In the third article of this issue, Fernando Naidtich of Montclair State University argues that reading teachers can develop a habit of social activism among students via a generally Freirean approach to reading instruction and provides an example that exemplifies the activist orientation such an approach can inspire. Finally, Lynda Leavitt and Beth Kania-Grosche review the history and current standing of the national standards movement—one that certainly impacts teachers at every level, every day.


In addition to these original pieces, we have two book reviews: Steve Jones gives us his take on Kieren Egan's book, *The Future of Education: Reimagining our Schools from the Ground Up*; and, Jessica Heybach of Aurora University/Northern Illinois University provides an analysis of Diane Ravitch's "about-face" book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education*. Yes, this issue has organized itself.

You will also find our regular video essay section, something we hope to continue as it gives a face to the name. This issue features Kieran Egan and David Owen—each discussing issues directly germane to the question of teacher preparation.

Before I leave you to your reading, I want to once again thank our ex-graduate assistant, Becky Migas...she has (darn her) gone off and graduated; but, has been kind enough to teach this old editor some new tricks. That is to say, if you have any comments or complaints about our online journal presence, email me. Webmaster was never a title I wanted...any volunteers out there? Thanks Becky, and good luck with life after graduate school. We miss you.

Enjoy.

PAX,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Eric C. Sheffield". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Eric" and last name "Sheffield" clearly legible.

Eric C. Sheffield, Editor
Critical Questions in Education

Critical Questions In Education

Eric C. Sheffield, Founding Editor

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Preparing Teachers to Remake Societyⁱ: New College at Teachers College, Columbia University, 1932-1939

Sonia E. Murrow, Brooklyn College—CUNY

The teachers college of the future...calls for radical modification of our present institutions for the training of teachers.

New College founders (1930, p. 1)

To those who have devoted their lives to the training of teachers, this educational experiment will come with something of a thrill.

Dean William F. Russell (1930, p. 23)

Introduction

New College was an experimental and demonstration undergraduate teacher education program, founded in 1932 at Teachers College Columbia University, only to be shut down by the administration eight years later. Described as an “unorthodox venture,” New College promised to be an alternative route to teacher education at a time when the nation was in the throws of economic and social devastation (Cremin et al, 1954, p. 222). This dramatic backdrop, “wedged between a past war and perhaps a coming war,” shaped how the program was executed and eventually became marginalized (New College Yearbook, 1939, p. 6).

This essay aims to illuminate New College’s founders, the philosophical framework behind the program, including its strong emphasis on community education,ⁱⁱ the mostly middle class students who enrolled in it, and finally its closing in the context of social, political, economic, and international events that held the attention of professional educators and others in the 1930s. Constructed with the help of primary and secondary sources (Cremin et al, 1954; Daugherty-Mix, 1968; Zeichner and Liston, 1991), this study also aims to characterize and analyze social, economic, and political realities that shaped higher education discourse about education at a time when progressivism dominated at Teachers College, and because of its influence, many programs nationwide (Tyack and Hansot, 1983). New College aimed to prepare empathetic and knowledgeable teacher-leaders, informed by a social reconstructionist critique of American capitalism, to work for social change in a community context. Though the program eventually could not garner the financial and ideological backing it needed to survive, it still provides a compelling example through which to contemplate complex and significant teacher education reform questions in the past and present.

New College was developed in the early 1930s within the context of professional debates about the nature of education. That is, scholars and practitioners debated the necessity or

inevitability of a connection between schooling and indoctrination. In 1934, at a meeting of the National Education Association, John Dewey suggested three roads education could take vis-à-vis indoctrination. “1) It can go on dwelling in the past; 2) it can set up ideal pictures for the future and strive to educate on the basis of that picture; 3) or we can strive through our schools to make pupils vividly and deeply aware of the kind of social world in which they are living” (p. 754). Dewey himself advocated for the last choice. He worried that the first was static and old, and that the second centered on an ideal that did not exist, and therefore could not adequately prepare students to analyze problems and make informed choices, a skill necessary for democracy. He believed the second choice was indoctrination in action. In many ways New College represented Dewey’s second and third choices simultaneously. For instance, the program presented ideal versions of education and society to students, and encouraged them to envisage and work toward such representations. Equally important to New College’s founders was the need for students to understand the social order as it existed, and so students were expected to probe real life examples.

Providing a helpful perspective from which to view New College, Zeichner and Liston (1991) suggest that one of the most notable characteristics of contemporary social reconstructionism in teacher education is its marginal status in relation to teacher education programs in the United States (p. 22). This study illuminates this claim through the example of a program that was marginalized soon after its inauguration. In many ways, New College represents a conflict over control of the teaching profession. Who decides what is the best way to prepare teachers? What is the role of the teacher in a school and in the larger society? Questions that were addressed by the New College model, such as—Who should teach? Should practical and academic training be integrated? What do teachers need to know to teach well? What is teaching for?—remain at the heart of teacher education. An alternative to the traditional programs at Teachers College, New College was itself a critique, an attempt to break the lock on teacher educators and the profession.

Social Reconstruction and Teacher Education

Those of us who are interested in making the educational profession function adequately in realizing a new American society equal to modern economic and cultural opportunities, must appreciate the necessity for breaking the present lockstep in teacher training.

George S. Counts (1935, p. 6-7)

New College grew out of the particular strand of progressivism described by George Counts in his groundbreaking speech to the Progressive Education Association in 1932. To the teachers, school administrators, education faculty, scholars, and activists to whom he spoke, Counts (1932) posed the now famous question: “Dare the School Build a New Social Order?” His speech was in effect a critique of his audience, suggesting that progressive education with its emphasis on child-centered practices had been interpreted narrowly and thus benefited only the children of the elite and middle class. According to Counts, progressive education had to reach beyond the transformation of the individual in order for societal transformation to be attained.

Alongside Counts’s call for social reconstructionism in education, he introduced his controversial views on “imposition and indoctrination”:



If Progressive Education is to be genuinely progressive, it must emancipate itself from the influence of this class, face squarely and courageously every social issue, come to grips with life in all of its stark reality, establish an organic relation with the community, develop a realistic and comprehensive theory of welfare, fashion a compelling and challenging vision of human destiny, and become less frightened than it is today at the bogies of *imposition* and *indoctrination* (Perlstein, 2000, p. 59).

Given the partiality of all educational activity and the domination of capitalistic and individualistic values, Counts argued, it was crucial that teachers foster values in support of a new social order. Counts (1932) found in indoctrination “a means to reconcile faith and reason, independence and civic solidarity, order and justice” (p. 9). While Counts’ call for indoctrination was acceptable among a group of radical progressive educators, not all progressives agreed with Counts and his supporters. For example, prominent professional educators such as Henry W. Holmes of Harvard University were strongly against schools promoting a pre-determined political program, favoring emphasis on students’ abilities to think critically about society. Zeichner and Liston (1991) note: “This tension between indoctrination and fostering critical intelligence has been characteristic of the reconstructionist tradition throughout its existence” (p. 27). School administrators, closer to classrooms than were scholars and professional educators, raised practical objections to indoctrination. “Those of us who have not taken leave of our senses,” wrote superintendent William Connor of Allentown, Pennsylvania, “know that the schools and schoolmasters are not generally going to be permitted to take the lead in changing the social order” (Krug, 1972, p. 239).

The Social Reconstructionists, including those who founded New College, took their central thrust from dissatisfaction with the economic and social system in the United States, and viewed curriculum and teaching as vehicles “by which social injustice would be redressed and the evils of capitalism corrected” (Kliebard, 1986, p. 183). Though collective ownership of the means of production was not a requirement for all educators who identified with social reconstructionism, most of them believed the economy must be regulated to support full employment and a fair standard of living for all. This view was shared by the New College founders and faculty and as such was reflected in the program’s promotional literature and curriculum. Counts (1932-33) himself was quoted in New College literature (New College Announcement) but even when he was not cited, the language used conjured up his brand of social reconstructionism. For example, the following appeared in the New College Bulletin during the winter of 1935:

New College students are urged to go beyond academic discussion to participation in social and political movements, each in accordance with his own convictions...They are to have a special concern for *reconstructing* educational institutions in light of the needs of a changing civilization (p. 2).

Making teacher education central to their social reconstructionist agenda, New College’s founders presented schools and adequately prepared teachers as “crucial elements in a movement toward a more just society” (Zeichner and Liston, 1991 p. 326).

Beginnings

Dr. Thomas Alexander’s personal strand of progressivism shaped New College, which was led by him from its inception until the summer of 1938 when Donald G. Tewksbury became director. Born in Germany and a graduate student at Columbia University (from where he

graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1910), Alexander eventually earned his doctorate from Teachers College Columbia University in 1918. He wrote about German progressivism on many occasions, including in *The Training of Elementary Teachers in Germany* (Alexander, 1929). According to Alexander (1929), progressive methods in education emphasized activity, social adjustment, and community rather than passive accumulation of information. In his conception, the teacher's attitude toward students had to incorporate greater warmth and informality. Moreover, the school had to be flexible in providing for individual difference and student interest (pp. 242-244). Alexander was sometimes nationalistic about German progressivism, believing that important tenets of the American version were bred on German soil. But his writings and his ideas for New College were similarly informed by American progressive education.

Alexander (1936) urged others to take an “active part in political movements” but did not seem to participate in activism beyond his role as a teacher educator (p. 450). He was never a part of the Kilpatrick study group known as the “Social Frontier,” and associated with the journal of the same name. Though Alexander was not an activist personally he appears to have accepted Counts' proposal for the reconstruction of society through educational activism. For example, New College's first published catalogue quoted Counts' argument that broad plans of social change must be translated into “changes, habits, and ideas in order to gain prominence” (New College Announcement, 1932-33, p. 4).

While Counts (1932) and other social reconstructionists influenced the philosophy behind New College, with its aim to prepare teachers to “enact social welfare through education” (p. 14), pedagogically Alexander was more influenced by Kilpatrick's views on how the psychological order and experience structure learning. In *The Educational Frontier*, Kilpatrick and his colleagues (1969) argued the school must have contact with daily life, integrate its activities into the community so to maintain and further the community, that a particular society (not an abstraction) be emphasized, and that scientific method be applied to everyday thinking (pp. 19, 33-36, 56 & 272-73). All of these themes were central to New College's program.

John Dewey's work was equally instructive to Alexander and his colleagues. Dewey's writings that were accessible and relevant to method had the greatest appeal—works such as “My Pedagogic Creed” (1897), *The School and Society* (1899), and *Schools of Tomorrow* (1915)—were read and discussed in New College seminars. Students took away from their studies at New College knowledge of Dewey's theory of experience and education, expressed by a former student as “learning by living” (Larson, 2001, p. 6). However, Dewey's philosophical works were nearly ignored resulting in a neglect of Dewey's emphasis on the value of abstraction and intellect (Daughterty-Mix, 1968, p. 49). This omission most certainly paved the way for criticism of the program as anti-intellectual and otherwise less than adequate.

Educating Teachers at Teachers College Columbia University

While New College directed its attention to the preparation of teachers, the major purpose of Teachers College in the 1920s and 1930s was the development of experienced teachers and the preparation of administrators and supervisors (Teachers College Bulletin, 1932-33, p. 2). The regular Teachers College Master of Arts presented an influential model for teacher education defined largely by James Earl Russell (1894-1927) and his colleagues, that included four main components: 1) general culture (study of the relationship among the various fields of knowledge), 2) special scholarship (inquiry around teaching), 3) professional knowledge (theory



and practice of American education), and 4) technical skill (practices to be honed in a “model school” (Cremin, 1978, pp. 10-11).

In the year preceding New College’s opening, Master of Arts and Master of Science degrees in Elementary Education, Secondary Education, and Rural Education (for Supervisors and Directors), were available to students who completed “one academic year of about forty hours a week in class attendance, preparation, study or laboratory” (Teachers College Bulletin, 1931-32, p. 7). Candidates had to earn at least thirty points over a period of no less than one academic year. Students were required to take eighteen credits of graduate courses at Teachers College but could earn credits beyond this in other Columbia University departments. Students took courses in their major as well as courses in education history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, economics and comparative education. In addition to coursework, a report on field or laboratory investigation demonstrating the ability of the student “to select, organize, and present the results of professional investigation in the field” was required for a Master’s degree (Teachers College Bulletin, 1935, p. 5). Fieldwork was also required but in many cases student teaching was not necessary because the typical student had already taught in a school.

Though situated at Teachers College, New College was in the words of its leadership an “autonomous body” and so was “unhampered in the development of its own particular program” (Linton, 1936, p. 305). Freedom from the more traditional tracks offered at Teachers College were selling points that distinguished the program and eventually contributed to its weakened position at the college.

Curriculum and Practice

The curriculum of the school, and the curriculum of New College, must be coextensive with life itself.

Clarence Linton (1936, p. 305)

In order to reconstruct education and the social order, the New College founders believed that a fresh and radical approach to teacher education was necessary. The curriculum included a wide range of experiences that were designed to support the education of the individual, citizen, and professional worker (Alexander, 1936, p. 448). Activities of particular importance in developing students were courses and seminars, dormitory life, participation in the New College Community in North Carolina, fieldwork in Harlem, travel and foreign study abroad, a period in industry, a year of student teaching and other internships, group projects, and participation in political organizations (Alexander, 1936, p. 457).

The curriculum was organized around “universal problems” with all areas of study to be integrated with actual life situations, including: 1) adjustment to and cooperation with others, 2) creation, interpretation and appreciation of art and beauty; 3) raising the standard of living, and 4) acquisition and transmission of the social heritage (Alexander, 1936, p. 449). New College students were to gain a broad understanding of these problems moving from how they apply to the individual, the society, and finally how they apply to teaching children, changing schools, and the function of education within the social order. There were four divisions that gave shape to the curriculum which were also designed to help students address “universal problems” vis-a-vis real life concerns (Linton, 1936, p. 4). The divisions were human relations (social sciences,

geography, home economics, child development and family life, psychology), natural sciences and mathematics, the arts (graphic, plastic, and industrial arts, music English languages and literature, classical languages and literature, modern foreign languages), and philosophy (including religion) (Linton, 1936, p. 4).

In the first two years students took the Central Seminar, which was both an orientation and a forum for the raising of problems broadly conceived. The program increasingly focused on professional concerns in the third year. Along with seminars, students took courses in human relations, natural sciences and mathematics, the arts, or philosophy. In addition to coursework, students participated in independent study, directed reading, considerable faculty-student counseling, and fieldwork referred to as “service.” Alexander along with New College faculty members Agnes Snyder and Florence Stratemeyer (1937) wrote about the seminars:

...The seminars serve as the centralizing agencies through which [students’] expanding knowledge and understanding are unified and shaped into a point of view and a line of action. The movement is from consideration of personal problems to social problems, and to the educational problem. Thus the attempt is made to aid the students in his development as a person, a citizen, and a teacher (p. 177).

Because there was a commitment to individualizing the program through one-on-one guidance, there were no time limits for fulfilling course and field requirements. The program was in session almost year round including summers spent either abroad, at the farm, or in industry. Students were expected to graduate in five years, which would earn them a combined Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts degree. This included the writing of a thesis based on an internship problem and practice teaching. Student teaching lasted one year in either a progressive public or private school and arrangements could be made to provide student teachers with a “moderate salary” (Teachers College Bulletin, 1930-1931, p. 13).

Community Education as “Contact with Life”

The teacher if he is to be “inspired by social vision” needs...to be sensitive to the underlying world currents, which directly or indirectly affect the destinies of communities and individuals.

Agnes Snyder (1935-36, pp. 1-2)

The New College curriculum aimed to provide “contact with life” and “understanding of the people” through firsthand experience in various communities (Russell, 1931, p. 22). Faculty member Agnes Snyder (1939) captured the ethos of community education at New College when she wrote, “Only as people learn to work together on concrete problems within their grasp can they be expected to come into a realization of the need for fundamental social change” (p. 308). She continued,

The student preparing to teach will, through working with concrete problems of community living, gain that necessary basic experience which will lessen the chance that he will launch on some half understood theoretical program of social change (p. 309).

As part of community education at New College, students lived at least a summer at the New College Community, a student-operated farm on a large estate in North Carolina. Faculty member Clarence Linton (1936) described the farm experience as “a laboratory for the study of



science, for the study of rural life, and for experience in human relationships” (p. 4). One of the activities at the farm was running schools for “the mountain children,” which took place during the summer and grew out of “neighborly intercourse” between New College students and the permanent residents (Bain, 1938, p. 245). Farm work included hoeing fields and gardens, killing and dressing chickens, and cooking meals for the farm members. Study of the farm’s surroundings and community problems led to projects such as installing a twenty-four foot in diameter water wheel for the generation of electricity, all done by students and under the supervision of a physics instructor (Alexander, 1933, p. 2). They also created a library at the local public school with books donated from Teachers College. Faculty member Winifred E. Bain (1938) described the farm experience as extending “beyond the hoe and the dishpan” with the students engaged in “earnest investigations of their own problems, and those of their mountain neighbors” (pp. 245-246). Former New College student, Mildred Larson, spoke in 2001 at age eighty-two about the farm as an integrated learning experience:

What we did was we extracted or extrapolated all the things we did on the farm and the curriculum that was formed or constructed around the work that we did, we had our natural sciences, we had our home economics, we had our social studies...We lived in a community of mountain people. And they were a wonderful source of information (p. 9).

The farm was just one of many opportunities for community education at New College. A period working in industry was to “develop in [students] an effective appreciation and understanding of... the attitudes and psychology of the industrial worker, and of the problems of the present social and economic order” (Alexander, 1936, p. 451). Larson’s husband also attended New College. While in the program, he worked in a factory as a fabric designer and was expected to design, market and sell what he made. Larson (2001) described the main elements of the period in industry, “You would earn money and experience the struggle that existed at the time...By learning, by doing, you understood what people in the outer world were struggling for” (p. 20-21).

The neighborhood surrounding Teachers College served as another site for community education at New College, which in this context was fashioned to support future teachers to participate in “urban community development” (Alexander, 1933, p. 9). Harlem was located just adjacent to Columbia’s Morningside Heights and provided an ideal location for student learning and activism. Alexander (1933) wrote about the neighborhood’s inherent value in preparing future educators: “The immediate environment of the University furnishes striking contrasts of economic privilege and social status. ...Many students who have spent their whole lives in New York City need to have their eyes opened to the seamy side of life, which exists around them” (p. 9).

New College students were required to visit Harlem schools in order to have contact with children of diverse racial and economic backgrounds and to observe “problems of the relation of the school to society” (Snyder, 1939, p. 303). Beginning in 1935, a student-run neighborhood program called Hilltop included a nursery school, a Kindergarten for four year olds, an afternoon program offering classes and recreational activities, and evening classes for neighborhood adults taught by Teachers College and New College students, jointly funded by New College and private monies. Just the afternoon program at Hilltop provided fifty internship placements for

New College students who taught among other things Art, making of model airplanes, cooking, dancing, drama, piano, sewing and singing to almost three hundred children (Snyder, 1936, p. 2). Beyond Hilltop, a number of New College students worked in settlements and other social agencies in the neighborhood.

Travel in the United States and abroad was another component of community education at New College. Most typically, students went to Germany or England and remained there for eight months. A portion of the time spent was in residence at a university with another portion spent living with a host family. Before departing, New College students identified problems for focused study while they were overseas. Gathering materials on “the chosen problem” and preparing an extensive report took up a big portion of the students’ time abroad (Alexander, 1933, p. 8). Participants were encouraged not to travel to other countries as they were expected to gain “insight into the civilization of one nation” (Alexander, 1933, p. 8).

Study and travel abroad was to also supply New College students with critical insight into the social, political, and economic challenges back home. Alexander described what students learned by participating in the overseas program,

Not only does one learn how to interpret intelligently the distinctive aspirations and institutions of another civilization, but he is likely to return with a far deeper insight into the virtues and limitations of his own country. If a student happens to have lived in a country like Germany which has gone through a revolution, he can never be a mere spectator when a struggle among conflicting social philosophies is underway in his own country (Alexander, 1933, p. 8).

Preparing students to be active in various struggles, with a critical perspective on governments in the U.S. and abroad, the study abroad experience was a central component of community education at New College

“Superior Young Men and Women”

New College attracted students who were drawn to its innovation and progressive curriculum, including the requirement “to actively take charge” of their own education (Teachers College Bulletin, 1935, p. 5). High tuition meant New College students were generally from at least the middle class, with many from across the country and even overseas (Cremin et al, 1954, p. 225). Among the students who enrolled in New College were Sinclair Lewis’ niece, Isabel Lewis of Missouri, and the Iraqi Prince, Nuhammad Nsir (New College Outlook, 1934, p. 4). But New College students were overwhelmingly Jewish and from New York City. In 1937, thirty-eight percent of the total student body and fifty percent of the New York City students at New College were Jewish, and the administration periodically conferred about how numbers could be brought down to a “more normal representation” (Letter to Thomas Alexander from Clarence Linton, January 15, 1935).

New College sought high caliber young men and women who would graduate and become “intellectually, physically, emotionally and socially” superior teachers (Linton, 1936, p. 1). Faculty member Clarence Linton (1936) described New College’s interest in locating the “best” students possible, which meant “individuals with high intellectual endowment, high scholastic attainment, high social and economic status, superior personal qualities, good health and good character (p. 2). The emphasis on getting excellent candidates meant that the application process was extensive.



Historian Kate Rousmaniere (1997) in her study of New York City teachers in the 1920s considered entrance requirements to teaching. She wrote, “the prerequisite of secondary and higher education for teachers meant that only the elite few who could afford an education were qualified to be teachers. Teaching was thus a method of upward mobility for those who were already upwardly mobile” (pp. 52-53). Rousmaniere (1997) suggests that popular images of the professional teacher further narrowed the applicant pool to those candidates who fit the social ideal and who were able and willing to take on a job that was billed as both a profession and a volunteeristic mission (p. 53). The candidates who entered New College in the 1930s may not have been very different from the New York City teachers described by Rousmaniere, except many of them were even more elite. Like Rousmaniere’s teachers of the 1920s, New College candidates saw teaching as “entering a profession” as well as having “a volunteeristic mission.”

Students and Activism

To substitute vigorous activity for academic neutrality in public affairs, New College students are urged to go beyond discussion and to participate in social and political movements.

B. Lamar Johnson (1937, p. 165)

New College students were generally a dedicated and liberal group and in some cases had leanings toward socialism and radicalism. For example, students hoping to participate in the “creation of a new social order” based on “production for use rather than for profit” launched a New College chapter of the Student League for Industrial Democracy in the fall of 1934, a national group that had John Dewey and Norman Thomas as members (New College Outlook, December 7, 1934, p. 1). The Sociology Club with professor William Taylor as its president hosted politically charged speakers and discussions on topics such as the class struggle in America (New College Outlook, December 7, 1934, p. 2). The title of one of the student newspapers, the *New College Interrogator*, provides further evidence that there was a student commitment to activist causes.

Alexander and his colleagues fashioned a program that would propel social change through teachers’ activist work. In 1933, he promised not to graduate students who were “politically illiterate or indifferent” and described the New College program as field-based political education (p. 10). To this end, students were encouraged by program faculty to participate in social and political movements. In the fall of 1937, Alexander announced two scholarships for students “who go farthest beyond academic neutrality” in participation in life outside the university (Report on New College, 1937, p. 19). On occasion, New College student activism was “a double-edged sword” for the program’s leadership. This was true when students threatened to participate in activism instead of sailing to Europe for study abroad. A college report described the incident:

This spring, when the students going to Europe were scheduled to sail, it was a bit troublesome to have some of them declare that they were in sympathy with the outlaw seamen’s strike that had been declared and that, therefore, it was against their conscience to sail on the boat selected, and that, furthermore, New College should show its stand by canceling the passages taken. It requires time to teach the art of “knowing when” (Linton 1937, p. 4).

But in reality, only a small minority of students and faculty participated in political activity. The New College student newspapers periodically castigated students for their apathy toward political events at the college, at Columbia University, and on the national and international scene (*New College Outlook*, December 6, 1937). Among New College faculty members, Paul Limbert (1934) probably most encouraged students to get involved in social causes, while others did limited political work; though faculty member Goodwin Watson was president of the University chapter of the Teachers Union (pp. 118-224).

Causes for Concern

Fashioned by its ambitious goals, New College had many atypical features that contributed to student and faculty skepticism, and for some, burnout. A system of exams measuring student achievement required a great deal of individual consultation and guidance. Though Cremin et al (1954) suggested: "Since the student body was small – capped at 360 students – such attention was possible," (p. 222) one might question this assumption given the complexity of the program and assessment system. Even though there were less than 300 students enrolled at one time, such attention must have been a challenge to provide.

The program seemed to have instilled "many kinds of insecurity" in its participants (Watson, 1964, p. 103). For example, there was uncertainty around the time frame necessary to get a degree as well as concern about the high tuition fees. Evidence of the toll these factors had on New College students can be seen in enrollment data. The program accepted 149 applicants in its first year and by 1934-35 there were 355 enrolled students. However, by the start of the 1937 academic year, over 60 percent of students who had been enrolled had dropped out (Cremin et al, 1954, p. 223). There is evidence that some students became disillusioned with aspects of the program's requirements claiming, for example, that "doing crowded out learning" at the farm community (Daughterty-Mix, 1968, pp. 224-225).

New College faculty were idealistic and creative and shared a desire for freedom, possibilities for experimentation, and a willingness to work long hours for low pay for "the sake of their ideals" (Watson, 1964, p. 102). However, salaries were often insufficient with seven of the 23 full-time staff members in 1937-1938 receiving \$2,000 or less, well below faculty salaries at Teachers College and Columbia University at the time (Cremin et al, 1954, p. 225). In 1937-38, the New College faculty, one third holding doctorates, consisted of 39 full and part-time members, most with yearly appointments. There is evidence that they were prolific writers, publishing numerous books, articles, and pamphlets in the first five years of the program (Cremin et al, 1954, pp. 224-225). On top of their scholarly work, most faculty members spent fifteen hours a week in the classroom and put in significant time for faculty-student conferences and staff meetings, some scheduled on Saturdays (New College Meeting Minutes, September 7-13, 1933). Student assessment was extensive and time-consuming, based on "growth," "behavior patterns," and "the degree to which the student [had] come into understanding of the meanings and implications of his own conduct and that of others" (Linton, 1937, pp. 4-5). Qualitative judgments of student growth were more difficult to make "than to assign a grade of 'A' or 'B,'" but program faculty believed such approaches were necessary because each student was unique, working at different rates and in different ways (New College Plan of Examinations, October 8, 1937).



Given the heavy workload it is no surprise that New College faculty felt pushed to their limit. The economist William Withers left the program over his concerns that faculty were asked to “work out too many ideas at once,” were underpaid, and had no time to keep up with their fields. Withers (1937) became a strong critic of New College suggesting that progressive educators had done “too much acting and not enough thinking” (p. 402). Concerns about the program’s anti-intellectualism were at the heart of these charges.

Lack of academic rigor was a cause of concern for students as well. Although students admired faculty members for their intellectual rigor in the classroom, students criticized some faculty members. During an interview conducted in 1968 by Daugherty-Mix (1968) for her dissertation on New College, many students had “regarded the general level of course work as low, and the greatest opportunity for getting a good academic education was through coursework taken at Columbia University.” One graduate suggested students were allowed to “get away with a lot of talk” and that small groups would control discussion in seminars. Another graduate suggested subject learning was not possible at the farm because students were too busy with chores (pp. 308-309).

Because of concerns about the program’s execution, early on committed faculty made efforts to improve New College. In 1936, a faculty report identified areas requiring attention including admissions techniques and the evaluation of student achievement (“The Next Four Years,” p. 1). The report suggested more information about applicants was needed, including psychological and oral examination results. In a section called “Improving Instruction,” the authors argued for,

[More] emphasis on the student’s part in working out his own problems. There is still too much ‘spoon-fed’ classroom instruction in New College. There needs to be much more growth in the direction of using the instructor as one would use a book, namely, as a source of experience and wisdom...(p. 2).

Though there is evidence of efforts to improve New College, enrollment decline became an area of concern just three years after it’s founding.

Termination of the Program

As previously stated, more than sixty percent of all New College students left the program before graduating. Reasons for student withdrawal included financial problems brought on by the Depression, the high ratio of female students who married, and disillusionment with the curriculum including the extensive field requirements. Also, attempts to transform students into activist-teachers and leaders were not warmly received by all. As a result, financial problems arose quickly and with major consequence.

New College was over budget each year after its first year by as much as \$57,000. Because the program was continuously in financial straits, closing it was considered as early as 1937 (Cremin et al, 1954, pp. 226-227). During 1936 and 1937, proposals were made to strengthen New College including that it be modified to correspond to state standards, but the proposals were opposed by program faculty and administration. In a desperate move to save the experiment, Alexander included a proposal that withdrew his own salary from the financial plan (Memo from Alexander, October 13, 1937). However, in early November 1938, during a special assembly of students and faculty, perhaps no longer willing to sponsor activities over which he

did not have direct control, Dean William F. Russell (Dean from 1927-1948) announced that New College would close the following summer. It has been suggested that because of the friendship between Alexander and Russell, Russell “carefully removed Alexander” a year before he announced his decision to terminate New College (Watson, 1964, p. 106). To many, the news was crushing. Cremin et al (1954) wrote: “The announcement of closing was taken as a declaration of war. After Russell read his brief statement at the meeting, a faculty member rose to make a speech of strong protest” (p. 227). Betrayed and angry, students and faculty met regularly after the announcement and mobilized to oppose the decision.

Critics argued the closing of New College was a political response to the left-wing activities of its faculty and students. The *Nation* suggested that Teachers College would benefit from its termination by the receipt of more gifts from conservative and business donors (See Wechsler, December 17, 1938). Left-leaning organizations including the League of American Writers, Local 537 of the New York College Teachers Union, the Communist Party of Columbia University and the Socialist Party all wrote protest statements (Daughterty-Mix, 1968, p. 333). Marxist Leo Huberman (1938), who had joined the New College faculty in its last year wrote, “A College is Fired,” for a publication of the American Federation of Teachers. Regardless of the support, in late November the Teachers College faculty voted 55 to 29 to close New College. After an investigation by the Teachers College Faculty Advisory Committee, it was concluded that the administration “acted honestly, and with the best intent to serve the interests of Teachers College as a whole” (Faculty Advisory Committee Report, 1939, pp. 448-449).

The Committee reported they could not determine the administration had expressed any criticism of “any radical theories held by the professors or students of New College” (Faculty Advisory Committee Report, 1939, pp. 448-449). However, supporters were convinced that radicalism led to New College’s demise. Undoubtedly, its status as a “cultural island” cut New College off from the intellectual, financial and administrative resources that it desperately needed to survive (Watson, 1964, p. 106). It has been suggested that Dean Russell believed that after the closing, angry New College students were “misled by Communist agitators not really interested in New College but bent on the overthrow of our democracy” (Watson, 1964, p. 112).

In 1939, a group of students published the final New College Yearbook in which they proclaimed, “New College is being closed. This book is a statement of the philosophy it has helped us build.” Alongside grainy black and white photos depicting the farm community, work in industry, work in schools, and study abroad, the students expressed their loyalty to the program and its underlying aims as they related to social reconstruction:

We recognize education itself as meaningful only in relation to the economic and social conditions of its time...We are preparing not only to be teachers in the narrow sense, but to be active participants in the community in which we will work and assume educational leadership (p. 6).

“The Power of Social Critique in Education”

The teacher must...have a fresh vision of the world or landscapes and cities and social institutions. This is the world that, ultimately, must inform every aspect of his teaching: and this is the world that his teaching will help to form anew, to re-form, to transform.

Lewis Mumford (1939, p. 496)



The same year New College was terminated, Lewis Mumford wrote about the social responsibilities of teachers, echoing views held by supporters of New College. Mumford's call for a political role for the teacher was made at the twilight of a diminishing progressive movement in professional education, brought on by the outset of World War II and subsequent changes in American social, economic and political life. Historian Ellen Condliffe Lagemann (2000) suggested that the "demise" of the "Social Frontier" as well as the waning of other progressive efforts, such as the discontinuance in 1940 of the radical social studies textbooks written by Harold Rugg, came as the United States entered World War II, leaving behind the economic suffering and intellectual radicalism of the 1930s. She wrote: "The nation's movement away from the social and intellectual ferment of the Great Depression years toward a war-related rise in patriotism yet again changed the social context for curriculum making" (p. 129). Lagemann's analysis pushes one to view New College in the context of a movement away from progressive efforts that rose out of the economic despair and subsequent radicalism of the 1930s, and within the wider history of progressivism in education.

A closer look at what was happening at the faculty and administrative levels at Teachers College during this period makes evident a gradual shift away from experimentalism and social reconstructionism for both ideological and financial reasons. In the early 1930s, Dean Russell appeared to be supportive of those associated with social reconstructionism and their efforts to transform teacher education, including New College. For example, when New College was first announced in 1931, Russell (1931) characterized its founders as having very good intentions, writing that they "would build the best system of teacher training that they know" (p. 23). Also, during this period, he supported ED 200F, the new two-semester course developed to provide Teachers College students with a critical perspective on schools and society through the study of the social context of education. By the late 1930s, however, Russell had lost confidence in teacher education efforts informed by social reconstructionism, including the New College program. In his 1937 Dean's Report, Russell claimed that the Social Reconstructionists had failed to make professional education specific, rigorous, and free from politics, and that they neglected to explain how theory would inform practice on the ground (p. 9). Moreover, he suggested that their efforts veered toward indoctrination and thus could not advance democratic dialogue, which he believed was essential to both education and democracy (See Barnard, *The New York Times*, February 24, 1937).

Although acknowledging the various disagreements that existed between Dean Russell and the Social Reconstructionists, the historiography tends to characterize the faculty and administration of Teachers College as having similar perspectives on the role and function of American education including schools in reform (See Cremin et al, 1954, p. 148). However, the existence of some shared commitments did not mean there was a shared allegiance to social reconstructionism across Teachers College in the 1930s (McCarthy and Murrow, in progress). In fact, there was conflict, and sometimes, deep discord across groups (See *The New York Times*, February 25 1937; McCarthy and Murrow, in progress). Most Division of Curriculum and Instruction faculty did not participate in New College. The separation between the Division of Curriculum and Instruction and those associated with social reconstructionism was defined by distinctively different foci on developing the child vs. reforming society (Peffer, 1934). While administrative progressives like Edward Thorndike critiqued child-centered, progressive practices, the reconstructionists' emphasis on educating for collectivism, an idea espoused by

many New College faculty, was in opposition to the ideas of William Bagley, Jr. and others who believed that true learning was best measured by standardized tests. At Teachers College, opposing viewpoints on educational reform had surrounded New College from the start. As time went on, Dean Russell and other administration officials lost interest in supporting the program in the context of its growing debt and a mounting intolerance for social reconstructionism in general.

Scholars argue the progressives including the Social Reconstructionists, had little impact on classrooms and schools and failed miserably to lead a new social order in the 1930s, or in any subsequent decade (See Cremin, 1964, p. 233; Moreo, 1996, pp. 30-31). Historian Daniel Perlstein (2001) suggests that if we judge Counts by a more modest standard then his efforts seem more impressive. For example, though educators either embraced or rejected indoctrination, Count's critique did succeed in placing study of the social problems of the day in the curriculum, what Perlstein calls "the power of social critique in education" (pp. 64-65). With New College and the work of the Social Frontier educators as a part of this legacy, the suggestion that social reconstructionism had little influence on mainstream U.S. teacher education is at least an overstatement.ⁱⁱⁱ Evidence of curricular social reconstructionism can be found in the foundations course ED 200F, which was required for all Master of Arts and Doctor of Philosophy students at Teachers College from 1933 until 1954 (See McCarthy, 2006). This interdisciplinary, two-term, team-taught foundations course reflected the content and values of New College, such as the critical study of the social context as a way to understand educational problems. As a result, spanning the years 1932 to 1954 the majority of enrolled Teachers College students were at least exposed to social reconstructionism, either at New College, while taking ED 200F, or through the numerous faculty members whose teaching of other courses was informed by this perspective. Because of Teachers College's significant role in training teachers, school leaders, and scholars in education during this period, social reconstructionism most likely influenced graduates of Teachers College as well as the programs in which they later carried out their careers (Cremin et al, 1954, p. 269).

Conclusion: Implications for the Present

The significance for a contemporary study of teacher preparation at New College lies in the position of social advocacy embedded in its curriculum and practice. As in the 1930s and education reform in the 2000s, social, political, economic, and international challenges shape teacher education reforms. Both periods produced attempts to solve educational problems through scientific means. Both periods also produced an opposition claiming that scientific approaches do not support education's full capacity in a democracy.

For example, during the Progressive Era, professional educators such as David Sneeden and John Franklin Bobbitt sought to efficiently train school children for their future roles in society (Kliebard, 1987, p. 78). Specifically, their "social efficiency" reform proposals, which encompassed curriculum making and practices like tracking, were to prepare students, "according to his capabilities" (Bobbitt, 1912, p. 269), for the social, political and economic status quo. Serving as a counterpoint to this discourse, Alexander and his New College colleagues believed that teaching and schooling must advance democratic collectivism, not individualism or capitalism. In their view, schools were well situated to promote "the common good," which to them meant economic and social equality and justice for all.



In the present, powerful stakeholders in education argue for “accountability” in all aspects of education. In their view, accountability can be enforced through the existence of State standards, frequent testing, “research-based” practices, and the linking of teacher competence with student outcomes. The aim of such efforts is to guarantee individual academic gain for hard working students so they can become active and constructive participants in the workforce after graduation. Barbara Bales (2006) suggests that since the 1980s policy changes have “sidelined” teacher education professionals and shifted program accountability from the state to national level. (p. 1). Today, the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and similar efforts to quantify and classify student gains through test scores increasingly influences teacher preparation. Secretary of Education Arnie Duncan, appointed by President Barack Obama in 2009, calls for teacher regulation and assessment through student testing data. In response to recent policies and mandates, Bill Ayers (2009) has suggested that more and more national and state sanctioned educational goals aim to “sort people into winners and losers” even though the dialogue dominating public education is centered on the promise to not leave any child behind. The dominant view supporting teacher preparation reform today links teachers’ purposes with their capacity to ensure student academic gain through test scores. Such a link is not problematic in and of itself. What is problematic is the increasingly narrow view of teachers’ capacities as they come into contact with youth in schools.

Bringing to bear the example of New College on teacher education in the present can aid in the posing of epistemological questions that challenge current practices. Such questions may include: What do “good” teachers know and do? What should be taught in school and to what ends? And, what are teachers for beyond their capacity to make high scoring students? Studying New College and its founders demonstrates that education reformers in an earlier period were critical of the existing social, political, and economic order and that the education reforms they proposed were aimed at changing it. Moreover, studying about New College brings to the fore its broadly conceived role for teachers, which included being a “worker” for social reform. Instead of preparing teachers to “sort students into winners and losers,” the program’s founders sought to change the social order through teachers’ work in communities. New College graduates were required to demonstrate they were “superior teachers” before a degree was conferred (Linton, April 26, 1935). For New College faculty, superior teaching was not defined solely by the academic gain of students taught, but by the degree to which teachers’ beliefs and practices were aligned with social reconstructionism.

Notes

1. Alexander, T. (1933). Significance of New College, 4. This quote is taken from Thomas Alexander’s 1933 memo on New College. He described an essential characteristic of the program as, “There will be experiences that will help the prospective teacher to grow in an appreciation of *the place of the teacher in the remaking of society*.”
2. “Community education” refers to curriculum and experiences that support students to encounter and navigate concrete problems of community living so as to gain insight into a community’s position in the larger social, political, and economic scene and its potential for improvement.
3. For examples of social reconstructionism informing teacher education since New College see Grinberg, J. (2002). “I had never been exposed to teaching like that”: Progressive teacher education at Bank Street during the 1930s, *Teachers College Record* 104: 1422-1460; See also Rogers, C. on the Putney Graduate Schools of Education (2006); Programs were instituted at Adelphi University (1948) and Fairleigh Dickinson (1964) with the help of former New

College faculty that carried on the New College philosophy. See also Daughterty-Mix (1968). New College at Teachers College: A history, 1932-1939, pp. 377-380.

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Take Out the Tests, and Hide the Grades; Add the Spiritual with All Voices Raised! Professor Explications and Students' Opinions of an Unconventional Classroom Milieu

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Introduction

Many articles about teaching and learning in higher education embody the southern expression of “preaching to the choir”—dramatizing negative teaching practices from the “average classroom” in order to convince progressive pedagogues (the very individuals who will be reading our theoretical forays) that their own instructional strategy innovations have merit. This is not such an article. In fact, a primary piece of the conceptual framework that underlies this paper is the argument that changing instructional practices and strategies has not led to substantive innovation in higher education classrooms. In fact, emphasizing changes in instructional strategies as a primary means for innovation is a recipe for maintaining the status quo.

Certainly, I do not denigrate the value of innovative instructional strategies. Writing as a way of knowing (Fulwiler, 1982), during-class discussion (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999), learning communities (Palloff & Pratt, 1999), critical analysis of course concepts (Brookfield, 1987), problem-based learning (Knowlton & Sharp, 2003), classroom assessment techniques (Anderson & Speck, 1998; Angelo & Cross, 2003), and similar instructional strategies that go beyond lecture and testing can be useful. As a means of promoting innovation within higher education classrooms, however, a change of instructional strategies lacks substance. What accounts for the limitations of strategy change as a means toward substantive innovation? First, institutions often advocate strategy change through workshops, book clubs, and other short-lived faculty-development interventions. Without support that extends beyond these interventions, faculty members often become uncomfortable with the strategy and therefore regress toward a “teach as I was taught” framework (Nelson & Knowlton, 2005). Usually, this framework consists of lecture and exam-giving, which are the antithesis of innovation. Second, even when faculty members successfully implement and sustain a strategy within their courses, the strategy does not always penetrate all course components. For example, a professor might implement problem-based learning, yet that professor still will assess students by way of matching, multiple-choice, and true/false exams. In such a case, the implemented strategy is not congruent with the assessment (Anderson & Puckett, 2003). Similarly, a professor might implement innovative collaboration strategies within the classroom, yet that same professor will retain the practice of dominating classroom discourse. In this case, the voice that students find within the collaboration is stifled during class (Brookfield, 1987; Brookfield & Preskill, 1999).



More broadly stated, instructional strategies typically have not led to true innovation in higher education because strategy change often has not been the result of a shift in the professor's epistemological stance—a change in the ways that a professor understands (and embraces) the nature of teaching, learning, and knowing. For example, many professors within higher education still equate learning with memorizing content; therefore, they do not fully value strategies that go beyond memorization. An epistemological shift toward understanding the nature of learning as a complex process that transcends memory would allow professors to more properly value congruent instructional strategies (Anderson, 1998; Bain, 2004; Knowlton, 2003). Furthermore, a shift in epistemology would require a reconsideration of learner needs, even when those needs are beyond the scope of what is commonly accepted in higher education—such as helping students come to understand themselves as unique human beings (Knowlton; 2003; Knowlton & Thomeczek, 2007).

To summarize the argument, substantive change in the classroom is best driven and motivated by a change in a professor's epistemological stance. In its full effect, a change in epistemological stance would lead professors to modify the classroom environment. By beginning with a desire to embrace a new epistemological stance and modify the classroom environment, changes in instructional strategies will emerge organically from the professor's desires for operationalizing that epistemology through environmental change. The typical approach of instructional strategies being handed to professors from on high is turned on its head.

So far, this paper has argued the limitations of changing instructional strategies as a starting point for innovating the higher education classroom. As an alternative, this paper has described a three-phased progression—embracing a new epistemological stance, revising the classroom environment to one that is consistent with that stance, and accepting the instructional strategies that emerge naturally from that classroom environment. In the remainder of this paper, my journey through these phases is described. I emphasize adjustments to the classroom environment that I made as a result of embracing a new epistemology. Within the discussion of the modified environment is a consideration of congruent instructional strategies and practices.

Conceptualizing a New Epistemological Stance

As I began reconsidering my own epistemological beliefs, I read a broad array of academic literature. Some was useful, but accepting that literature as the pinnacle of philosophical ideas about teaching and learning was difficult for me. Even perspectives that were offered under the guise of being based in contemporary and innovative views of higher education struck me as being quite pedestrian. And, in total, the body of literature struck me as homogenous, offering little that led me to ideas that broke my thinking out of its conventional shell.

By happenstance, however, I encountered an epistemological perspective that was personally meaningful to me. Appropriately, I did not find this perspective in the academic literature; instead, this perspective came from noted author and business guru Stephen Covey (2006), in response to a question about the “horizon regarding the personal effectiveness with today's new college grads.” Covey says,

The future and success of today's college grads lies in training them to think strategically, conceptually, and interdependently. The key is to inspire them to find their unique talent and passion. I would encourage them to develop a character of deep substance and integrity so that their security comes from within and they're not afraid of leaving their comfort zone and facing new challenges. I also encourage young people to be humble and open to gaining experience and staying on a high learning curve. Because we have moved to a new knowledge-worker economy that is influenced by the world-class competition of a global, digitized economy, they have to go full-speed to catch up and add value. (p. 56).

Covey's commentary implied answers to the exact epistemological questions that I had been wrestling with, and I recognized immediately that those answers could change my classroom environment in productive, yet unconventional, ways.

Why did Covey's (2006) answer hold personal meaning to me? His decisively non-scholarly, yet direct, language resonated with me. His language created sonorities that I did not hear within scholarly publications. More specifically, his style and substance defined learning in ways that stretched my thinking in new directions; and I felt that his ideas would stretch my students' thinking, too. Certainly, in some ways, Covey's definition of learning could be considered conventional; and it is a definition that fits with ideas that exist in scholarly literature. After all, training students "to think strategically, conceptually, and interdependently" (Covey, 2006, p.56) is indicative of both a liberal arts education and an education for the marketplace (Knowlton, 2003). Nevertheless, to describe learning as students finding "their own unique talent and passion" and developing an internal "character of deep substance and integrity" (p. 56) goes beyond the conventional classroom. Traditional classrooms are shaped around a sense of substance coming externally through a process of content acquisition, not around students searching for inner substance. Covey's description of learning is consistent with some academic literature—transformative personal change (Palooff & Pratt, 1999) and notions of "learning about the self" (Knowlton, 2003, p. 8), for example. Covey's view of learning addresses the central question of "what will all this [education] do to me" (Holmes, 1996, p. 24). Still, the uniqueness of Covey's language liberated my thinking in ways that academic literature previously had not.

In addition, Covey (2006) offers an unorthodox view of the students' (and by extension, the professor's) role in a classroom. These views are not usually overtly addressed within higher education classrooms. Covey, for example, challenges students to demonstrate humility and be "open to gaining experience;" he says that students should not be "afraid" of stepping beyond "their comfort zones" (p. 56). Humility, openness, and fearlessness can occur only when students accept the responsibility of "staying on a high learning curve" and going "full-speed" (p. 56). Perhaps all of these characteristics—humility, openness, and acting at full speed beyond what is comfortable—are characteristics that most professors assume and hope for. For me, however, Covey's articulation of these ideas allowed me to begin to move beyond covert and nebulous states of assuming and hoping; the challenge that I wanted to place in front of my students was now overt and concretely articulated. Furthermore, I came to realize that the idea of students staying on a high learning curve and always going full speed countered my commonly-practiced approach of professor and students interchanging the responsibility of going full-speed. That is, I often would go full speed while delivering content to students, which



sometimes left students in a passive role; and then I would require students to ramp up their learning curve toward the opportunity of going full-speed as they reacted to my deliveries.

As I have suggested, Covey's (2006) statement offers a substantive epistemology that he uniquely articulates. Both the substance and form of his ideas stretched my thinking and caused a shift in my epistemological beliefs. I quickly realized that Covey's vision could not be achieved through changes in instructional strategies. Instead, the classroom environment must be changed. Without doubt, Covey helped me recognize the need to move my classroom beyond students' comfort zones and toward high learning curves in order to maximize the potential for substantive student learning.

Adjustments to the Classroom Environment

Covey's (2006) ideas caused me to shift my epistemology. To embrace that epistemology fully, I would have to make adjustments to my classroom environment. As I contemplated this challenge of making adjustments to my classroom environment, I came to recognize that the task-at-hand was about more than *adjusting*; embracing Covey's views required a complete reinvention. To think in terms of "adjusting the classroom environment" is to think only in academic and analytical ways; such thinking promotes scholarly detachment from tasks and their context. This type of detachment allows students (and professors) to remain within their comfort zones and to avoid the types of personal risk that are necessary for finding inner substance, humility, and openness. To make changes to the classroom environment in ways that would give momentum to Covey's ideas, I couldn't think about the matter as a conventional academic—making changes to routines, assignments, and use of human capital. Instead, I had to aim for the unconventional—dare I say "the surreal." My goal was to reconceptualize the very vibe and ambiance that students experienced within my classroom. The goal was to reinvent the classroom milieu.

Using Covey's (2006) definition as the conceptual framework, I point to four ways that I set aside a traditional classroom environment and embraced an unconventional milieu. Within this discussion, a fine line exists between reinventing the milieu and implementing instructional strategies. Properly understood, this section of the paper illustrates an unconventional milieu that stretches all classroom participants—both students and professor—beyond their comfort zones and toward the apex of a steep learning curve. Changes in instructional strategies were not an end in themselves; but, instead, changes in instructional strategies became a way of stabilizing the milieu that I was trying to create. My intention is to provide a description of how I implemented these changes in an undergraduate educational psychology course; in addition, I provide arguments in support of these four changes to the classroom milieu. Within a discussion of these four, I include students' opinions from end-of-semester evaluations.

Amplifying All Voices

Faculty members often seem progressive in accepting diversity. Provocatively, though, I think that we faculty members often define diversity in very narrow, limited, politically-correct, and intolerant ways. Worse, we often do not recognize our own intolerance. For example, several years ago, I was attending a diversity workshop that was sponsored by my university's Provost's office. During the workshop, one participant stood up and proudly announced her state of enlightenment as one who respects all people from all backgrounds; and then she praised the

workshop as a step toward “setting aside the farm-boy mentality.” Coming from at least three generations of farmers, I was incredibly offended by such a statement.

I would argue that both her own implicit prejudice and her lack of recognition of that prejudice will influence her willingness and abilities to hear students’ views. By not hearing students, she is oppressing the opportunity for learning-based dialogue. All faculty members have biases (whether they know it or not) and privilege some classroom voices (often their own) over others. The biases lead to a sense of privilege that is extended only to some within the classroom community. Speck (1998a) says that pluralism is inherent to our classrooms regardless of how homogenous a set of students may seem; if Speck is right, then we constantly should be asking ourselves how to enhance and amplify the voices of those who bring perspectives, experiences, and beliefs that are most dramatically different from our own. Without the amplification of those voices, we surely will fall short of Covey’s (2006, p. 56) vision for “interdependent thinking” as a means of helping future college graduates become comfortable operating outside their comfort zones.

I try to accomplish this amplification of other voices through creating a classroom milieu that diminishes and demeans my own formal authority as the course professor. Toward this goal, I regularly send students a message about the importance of social learning among them; it is a message that routinely appears in my course syllabi as well as in other course documents: “You have significantly more to learn from each other than you have to learn from me.” Similarly, I often have included in my syllabi the statement that “the sooner that I can remove myself—as course professor—from the learning situation, the more substantive that [student] learning will become.” Such statements only struck me as unconventional when senior faculty members in my department suggested that I remove those statements from my tenure and promotion dossier. They questioned whether such statements would raise concerns among various committees about my ability as a pedagogical “professor”—one who professes.

To further diminish my own role as formal authority, I send students a message that they should feel obligated to interrupt my lectures with their own contributions. I guide lectures away from “teacher talk” and toward interactive and free-for-all events. During the free-for-all class sessions, I try to adopt a stance of vigorously challenging students’ views and raising the best arguments that I can muster against the perspectives that they offer. Along this line, I somewhat forcefully try to push unpopular and counter-intuitive perspectives, but I leave plenty of opportunities for students to push back: “If I sound like an out-of-touch Ivory-tower dinosaur, then please say so! You have a responsibility to make your voice louder than mine.” One colleague who observed my classroom recently suggested to me that my manner in the classroom almost “begs for” students to challenge my authority and disrespect my expertise. I think this peer reviewer meant that as a criticism; I viewed it as praise, and I indicated to her that I was delighted that she noticed.

One way that I ensure that the during-class free-for-all events are productive is by formalizing homework assignments that prepare students to reply to my vigorous challenges. Even within the homework, though, I abolish many notions of formality in an effort to amplify students’ voices. One formality that I have become quite liberal with is the use of “correctness” in students’ writings. It is rare that I include criteria related to formal argument in homework



and other written assignments. Notions of a thesis sentence, APA citations, and the like are usually non-existent. Furthermore, grammar, spelling, and punctuation as criteria in writing assignments are rare. My message to students is clear: “Slang? Sure! Your own culturally-appropriate vernaculars? Absolutely! Profanity? If that helps you!” My agenda is to hear students’ ideas in their own authentic language, not to ensure that students articulate ideas with a level of scholarly pompousness that will result in my own gratification. To best allow a student’s voice to be heard, I have found that I must set aside my preconceived notions of *how* that voice should sound.

Do my attempts to “hear” students result in students feeling comfortable sharing their views and beliefs? On end-of-semester evaluations, I regularly collect data to determine if students are sharing their actual ideas and beliefs, as opposed to conforming to the ideas that they think would gain my favor. I ask students to respond to the following prompt: “On opinion-based writings, I tended to tell [the course professor] what I thought he wanted to hear, not what I really thought.” They respond to this prompt on a five-point Likert scale ranging from a “Strongly Agree” (5) through “Strongly Disagree” (1). See Table 1. While the standard deviations are quite large, I am pleased that across the twenty-five sections of Educational Psychology for which I have data, the number has never reached a standard of “neutral” (3). I view students’ willingness to honestly articulate their beliefs as an important step toward learning. Until a classroom milieu fosters students’ willingness to share their beliefs, pretense will take precedent over learning.

Semester & Section Number	Number of Students	Average	Standard Deviation
Spring 2003	32	2.25	1
Fall 2003	25	1.80	.91
Spring 2004, Section 1	27	2.22	1.31
Spring 2004, Section 2	30	2.63	1.35
Summer 2004	26	1.69	.79
Fall 2004; Section 1	26	2.42	1.34
Fall 2004; Section 2	24	2.25	1.09
Spring 2005, Section 1	30	2.33	1.27
Spring 2005, Section 2	37	1.92	.85
Summer 2005	26	1.96	1.06
Fall 2005, Section 1	25	2.12	1.33
Fall 2005, Section 2	26	1.96	1.11
Spring 2006, Section 1	24	1.88	1.12
Spring 2006, Section 2	26	1.96	.96
Fall 2006, Section 1	24	2.75	1.42
Fall 2006, Section 2	26	2.56	1.39
Fall 2006, Section 6	15	2.00	1.31
Spring 2007, Section 1	22	2.50	1.34
Spring 2007, Section 2	28	2.46	.88
Spring 2007, Section 5	24	2.75	1.19
Summer 2007, Section 1	28	1.93	1.12

Summer 2007, Section 2	24	2.04	1.08
Fall 2007, Section 1	23	1.91	1.12
Fall 2007, Section 2	22	2.50	1.22
Fall 2007, Section 3	26	2.62	1.27

Table 1. “On opinion-based writings, I tended to tell [the course professor] what I thought he wanted to hear, not what I really thought.”

Do my approaches for amplifying student voices result in learning? Table 2 shows a comparison of formal lectures with more open-ended class discussions across twenty-five sections of the course. Students marked these items using an informal “learning report scale.” This scale obligates students to mark each item in one of several ways: as not contributing to their learning and being “a waste of [their] time” (1); being “vaguely useful and only contribut[ing] loosely to [their] learning” (2); providing them “with a moderate opportunity to learn” (3); contributing “more than moderately to [their] learning” (4); and being “extremely useful in [their] own thinking and learning” (5). As can be seen from Table 2, the averages for open-ended discussions where all students had the opportunity to participate are higher than the averages for formal lectures. This suggests that, on average, allowing students’ voices to be heard within the context of the classroom does contribute to student learning in ways that formal lectures do not. As a result of both my own convictions about the need to amplify student voices and students’ opinions about the relative merits of open-ended, free-for-all discussions, I have, as of the Fall of 2009, completely abandoned formal lectures within my educational psychology course.

Semester & Section Number	Number of Students	Formal Lectures	Discussions & Participatory Activities
Spring 2003	32	3.89 (1.01)	4.34 (.78)
Fall 2003	25	3.32 (1.03)	4.36 (.70)
Spring 2004, Section 1	27	3.89 (.89)	4.44 (.70)
Spring 2004, Section 2	30	3.70 (.95)	4.03 (1.00)
Summer 2004	26	4.15 (.78)	4.77 (.65)
Fall 2004; Section 1	26	3.50 (1.01)	4.65 (.68)
Fall 2004; Section 2	24	3.79 (.82)	4.38 (.75)
Spring 2005, Section 1	30	3.73 (1.12)	4.67 (.47)
Spring 2005, Section 2	37	3.70 (.87)	4.27 (.79)
Summer 2005	26	4.15 (.72)	4.58 (.57)
Fall 2005, Section 1	25	4.60 (.58)	4.64 (.64)
Fall 2005, Section 2	26	4.08 (.63)	4.69 (.47)
Spring 2006, Section 1	24	4.17 (.65)	4.42 (.72)
Spring 2006, Section 2	26	3.65 (.75)	4.27 (.72)
Fall 2006, Section 1	24	3.50 (1.06)	3.88 (.99)
Fall 2006, Section 2	26	3.00 (1.10)	3.77 (1.27)
Fall 2006, Section 6	15	4.00 (.85)	4.47 (.64)
Spring 2007, Section 1	22	3.95 (1.13)	4.32 (.99)
Spring 2007, Section 2	28	4.04 (.69)	4.21 (.79)



Spring 2007, Section 5	24	3.78 (.74)	4.21 (.93)
Summer 2007, Section 1	28	3.86 (.71)	4.82 (.39)
Summer 2007, Section 2	24	4.13 (.80)	4.83 (.48)
Fall 2007, Section 1	23	3.73 (1.03)	4.36 (.95)
Fall 2007, Section 2	22	3.91 (.87)	4.45 (.91)
Fall 2007, Section 3	26	3.81 (1.02)	4.31 (.93)

Table 2. Comparison of formal lectures and free-for-all activities

Inclusion of Spirituality within the Curriculum

Covey (2006) notes that students' sense of substance must come from within. Covey also notes the need for students to find their own passions. Finding one's own sense of substance and passions requires a spiritual focus (Holmes, 1996; Knowlton, 2003; Murphy, 2005). If finding one's own substance and passion is inherently spiritual and if finding substance and passions is inherently related to learning, then a conclusion is clear: To not provide room for spiritual rumination within the classroom is to hinder learning.

Such an argument is not one of scholarly sacrilege. After all, historically speaking, many now-secularized institutions of higher education once were steeped in religious foundations (Burtchaell, 1998; Marsden, 1994; Murphy, 2005). More currently, from a religious perspective, "faith" often is defined as "act-oriented meaning making" (Nelson, 1987, p. 334), which is inherently "exploratory" and "perspectival" (Holmes, 1996, p. 59) and based on "raising questions and doubts" through "dialogue" (p. 74). These religious perspectives about learning are strikingly similar to commonly-held secular views of learning. Welch (1993) notes that both the "construction of knowledge" and the "construction of self" are important aspects of a true education. Welch points out that these constructions are, in fact, very analogous to religious conversions (p. 388).

While I personally value these connections to religion, I am not arguing that overtly religious perspectives and modes of inquiry should become part of the classroom milieu. Perhaps spirituality in classrooms "welcomes, but does not require, religious beliefs" (Bento, 2000, p. 653). Still, my point remains unchanged: Allowing room for the spiritual promotes student learning and moves higher education classrooms toward a milieu that is likely to vitalize the types of epistemological shifts that I describe earlier in this paper. Consider, for example, a postmodern view that dominates many higher education classrooms—that knowledge and even truth itself are cognitive or social constructions. How can the social construction of knowledge be discussed in any meaningful way without addressing the spiritual realm, given the prominence of spirituality within many students' lives? Within a postmodern framework, students must ask themselves metaphysical questions about their own epistemological, ontological, and deontological stances. The answers inherently are spiritual and require a type of reflection that transcends the acquisition of content.

More practically, consider the popular practice of service learning. One cannot meaningfully implement service learning without discussions of students' civic duty and responsibility to others (Murphy, 2005). Such discussions have spiritual components. Some literature is beginning to broach the subject of spirituality within secular classrooms (see, for

example, Hoppe & Speck, 2005); but because the notion of student spirituality within classrooms still is, at best, an unconventional notion (Bento, 2000; Burtchaell, 1998; Welch, 1993), practical advice within this literature is quite thin. I have attempted to create space for students' spiritual selves within the classroom milieu; this space is created through curriculum decisions and through the way that I facilitate class sessions. Both the curriculum decisions and facilitation practices work together to create a milieu that activates students' egos. As one of my mentors recently said to me, "True learning begins when we can get inside of students' ego circles." Within that circle, the spiritual realm is found.

How do I operationalize this epistemological shift toward a spiritual classroom milieu? In terms of curriculum, I share with students various perspectives that offer ethereal treatment of student learning. As one example, I do share Covey's (2006) views with students. As another example, I regularly read to students excerpts from the cult classic novel *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (Pirsig, 1981). Throughout that novel, Pirsig offers discussion of "care" and personal investment as a part of the learning process. Similarly, I introduce some of the ideas of Wayne Dyer (2001, 2004), who argues that we all have a creative genius within us, and we can activate that creative genius through our powers of intention. Once I introduce the notion of genius within us, I routinely refer to it both during class and as a part of assignment guidelines, course rubrics, and other handouts. Through these passages as added elements to the curriculum, I attempt to lead students to embrace an ethereal view of themselves as seekers who are not confined by the physical realms of time, place, or classroom activity. I aim to help students come to understand themselves as integrated spiritual beings, where the emotional, psychological, and intellectual all combine as they activate intention to attract knowledge into their lives. I am attempting to involve their ego as part of the course, and this involvement can be found in most course activities.

Do these curriculum additions influence student learning? I have asked students to consider the contributions of Pirsig (1981) and Dyer (2001, 2004) toward their learning. Using the earlier-described "learning report scale," students respond to the following prompt: "[The course professor] reading to the class excerpts from *Zen & the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and from *The Power of Intention*." Table 3 shows the results over the four sections in which I have used Pirsig and Dyer as classroom readings. As can be seen from that table, one average was over a four, while the others were between a three (providing a "moderate opportunity to learn") and a four (contributing "more than moderately to learning"). The summer section that contained an average higher than a four was a very abbreviated semester—meeting six hours a day for three weeks. Perhaps the higher average for that section can be explained by the fact that the course was condensed and thus references to the content-in-question were more frequent and focused.



Semester & Section Number	Number of Students	Average	Standard Deviation
Summer 2007	24	4.04	.91
Fall 2007, Section 1	22	3.41	1.01
Fall 2007, Section 2	17	3.59	1.12
Fall 2007, Section 3	26	3.62	1.10

Table 3. The educational value of the course professor “reading to the class excerpts from *Zen & the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and from *The Power of Intention*”

Also, I try to facilitate class sessions in ways that emphasize the potential for spirituality as a part of the classroom milieu. I am coming to discover that requiring students to be alone with their own thoughts can promote learning in a more ethereal and spiritual sense than can collaboration with an instructor or classmates. To this end, in recent years, I sometimes call for moments of silence within lectures and discussions. For example, I regularly ask students a question that can serve as the basis for a discussion; before I allow discussion to begin, though, I insist on thirty seconds of silence to allow students to formulate an answer: “Use this thirty seconds as an opportunity to allow the creative genius within you to emerge.” After this period of silence, volunteers can respond.

Similarly, while I have long been an advocate of the notions of “writing to learn”—informal writings designed to help students explore their own thinking and discover what they really believe about content and about themselves as learners—I am just, in the last several years, coming to see these writings as opportunities to emphasize the potential for spirituality as a part of the classroom milieu. Writing-to-learn activities allow students solitarily to discover a more vulnerable, honest, and true self—to find the creative genius within themselves. I constantly reintroduce this notion as I prepare students for the writing task: “We’ve done lots of talking about this topic over the last forty minutes. I’d now like to do a five-minute writing about your reactions to the discussion as a means of allowing you to be alone and look within.”

Admittedly, there is a fine line between facilitation as means of enhancing an unconventional classroom milieu and facilitation as instructional strategy. Brookfield and Preskill (1999), for example, introduce silence within discussions as an instructional strategy. Furthermore, writing-to-learn is a common idea within the literature, and that idea often is propagated as instructional strategy (see, for example, Fulwiler, 1982; Lindemann, 1995; Thomeczek, Knowlton, & Sharp, 2005). I absolutely try to implement both silence and writing to learn in strategically useful ways, but my approach to both silence and writing-to-learn is first meant to be additive to the overall milieu of the classroom. Silence and writing-to-learn are not offered as isolated strategies; they become a part of the norm of the classroom zeitgeist.

Do these facilitation approaches that try to pierce students’ ego circles by leaving them to be alone with their thoughts contribute to learning in my classroom? Because my use of silence is a recent innovation to my classroom, I have collected data about its value in only one course section. The item was a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). The prompt read as follows: “[The course professor] sometimes giving us 30

seconds to think about our answer to a question helped me figure out what I wanted to say.” The average was a 4.75 (standard deviation of .44).

More consistently, I have collected data on students’ opinions of the educational benefits of writing-to-learn. I do collect data on individual categories of writing-to-learn assignments. An explication of this data is beyond the scope of this paper. Here I report findings on a single item that treats the educational value of writing-to-learn more holistically. The item read as follows: “I experienced ‘writing to learn’ in this class in that I did have times where I discovered what I was trying to say while I was writing. Writing helped me ‘figure stuff out.’” The results on a five-point Likert scale are shown in table 4. The averages do seem to suggest the educational benefits of leaving students to be alone with their thoughts. All of the averages in these five sections were higher than a four, which indicates agreement with the prompt.

Semester & Section Number	Number of Students	Average	Standard Deviation
Summer 2007, section 1	28	4.75	.44
Summer 2007, Section 2	24	4.79	.41
Fall 2007, Section 1	23	4.43	.90
Fall 2007, Section 2	22	4.73	.55
Fall 2007, Section 3	26	4.62	.64

Table 4. “I experienced ‘writing to learn’ in this class in that I did have times where I discovered what I was trying to say while I was writing. Writing helped me ‘figure stuff out.’”

Importantly, it is questionable whether students recognize the spiritual component of my course. Because the innovations that I describe of integrating spiritual components into the classroom are relatively new, only once has it occurred to me to ask students if they recognize a spiritual component within the classroom. In one section of Educational Psychology during the summer of 2007, I asked students to respond on a five-point Likert scale to the following prompt: “I think this course had a ‘spiritual’ component to it.” The responses resulted in an average of 3.29 (with a standard deviation of 1.20), creating a cumulative response that is closer to “neutral” than to “agree.”

Continuous and Open-Ended Assessments of Content and Metacognitive Skill

When I discuss the syllabus with students early in the semester, I describe the ways that I will (and will not) assess their learning. As a part of this description, I regularly survey students through an informal show-of-hands survey: “How many of you have ever gotten an ‘A’ on a test or exam; and as you were sitting there looking at that test once it was returned to you, you found yourself thinking, ‘I sure pulled the wool over that professor’s eyes, I didn’t know any of this content’?” Typically, every hand in the room goes up. I then survey them with a parallel question: “How many of you have ever received back a ‘D’ or ‘F’ on a test; but as you were looking at the test, you found yourself thinking, ‘But I know this content so well. I could tell the professor everything about it right now’?” Many students answer in the affirmative. Often, I extend this line of questioning even further: “If I gave you the exact same exam today that you



made an ‘A’ on last semester, would you make an acceptable grade on it?” The answers routinely are negative.

I have implemented these informal polls in my courses over the last five years as a part of the first-day discussion about the syllabus, and the anecdotal results have seemed consistent over time: Tests and exams, my students report, do relatively little to instill meaningful learning or to serve as a report that accurately reflects what they have learned. If evidence suggests that tests and exams do not create and demonstrate meaningful student learning and if the professoriate is committed to student learning, then the professoriate is remiss—if not unethical—to support exam-based classroom assessment systems. Alternatives exist; and in what follows, I offer three points of direction; each of which is consistent with the epistemology inherent to Covey’s (2006) perspectives.

First, I have abandoned most notions of positivist assessments where students are obligated to report to me close-ended answers to convergent questions. Assessments in my course are writing intensive and require students to develop their own views of truth—their own thoughts, ideas, understandings, analyses, and judgments. These types of assessments do embrace relativism and subjectivism. Many college students are not accustomed to their own views of truth serving as assessments; as a result, these assessments do contribute to an unconventional milieu. Still, as I discussed in relationship to table 5, students do tend to believe that these writings help them learn. More to the point of assessment, I believe that these writings give me meaningful insights into student learning. Furthermore, I have found that my responses to these student assessments are more robust (and thus more instructive) than would be my responses to a test.

Second, many assessments in my course do not focus on content acquisition; instead, they focus on students’ metacognitive awareness. Assessments can promote the types of learning advocated by Covey (2006) only when those assessments are balanced between ones that foster students’ learning of content and those that foster students’ learning about themselves as learners. For example, in order to best promote learning, how might we define the job of, say, a music appreciation instructor? Would it be to teach the facts and figures of music history—a litany of who wrote what opera or symphony joined with the dates and composers? Or, is the job of that instructor to teach students *how* to learn about music—the learning process that a musicologist, music theorist, or performer engages in to better understand the nature of music? Erring toward requiring students to consider their own learning provides a metacognitive (thinking about thinking) perspective and shifts the classroom environment away from an emphasis only on content acquisition; instead, a milieu is created where students recognize the need to think about themselves, not just about course content. This shift in milieu is consistent with the types of thinking skills that Covey advocates, and it is a shift that I have embraced within my educational psychology course.

Because these assessments promote relative and contradictory views of truth and because these assessments often focus on metacognition rather than content, these first two points alone create an unconventional classroom milieu. But, my third point of direction is that these open-ended assessments of both content and metacognitive thinking are consistently and informally integrated into my courses. Consistency and informality of assessments intensify the

contributions of my assessment system to an unconventional milieu. In fact, assessments in my educational psychology course create a natural feedback loop that constantly cycles as a part of the classroom milieu. This loop occurs both during class and outside of class. At the end of class sessions, I will ask students to complete a one-minute paper that summarizes key points and offers a statement of reaction or suggestions for implications. In other cases, I will ask students to explain the “muddiest point” of that day’s class session. Between class sessions I require students to use discussion boards, email, and other asynchronous means to complete assessments in the form of offering original discussion contributions and replies to classmates’ contributions. Certainly, all of these are assessments in that they help me make judgments about my students’ ideas and progress. Still, these assessments are highly informal and frequent. I have found that integrated assessments—as opposed to assessments that are tacked on to the end of an instructional unit—are more likely to help change the classroom milieu toward one where students have to, in Covey’s (2006) words, “go full speed” and stay “on a high learning curve” (p. 56).

This approach to assessment is discussed in the academic literature. Both the one-minute paper and the muddiest-point paper are Classroom Assessment Techniques as described by Angelo and Cross (1993). My approach to using asynchronous communication tools for assessment is a strategy that is quite similar to already-published tactics (see, for example, Knowlton, 2004). The notion of informal assessments that are constantly integrated exists in the academic literature, as well (see, for example, Anderson, 1998; Knowlton & Knowlton, 2001). On one level, then, the approach that I describe may seem conventional. Still, students report that this approach adds a unique “feel” to the course that is quite different from what is commonly found in higher education. In fact, students sometimes do not even recognize that my course has assessments. On end-of-semester evaluation questions about the quality of assessments, students sometimes respond with a “not applicable.”

On end-of-semester evaluations, students qualitatively have addressed this different “feel” that occurred as a result of not having large-scale formal assessments: “The no midterm and final was a strong advantage because instead of spitting out facts and only memorizing info for a short period of time, I actually focused on learning for once.” Another student expressed a congruent idea by noting that a strength of the course was removing an “emphasis on tests and terms” and emphasizing, instead, a process of “just making [students] actually learn and think.” Comments similar to these are common. A routine aspect of these comments is the notion that the lack of tests creates uniqueness—the emphasis was placed on learning “for once” and that the course caused students to “actually” learn.

Do these three points of direction for assessments limit students’ learning in my courses? The answer seems to be “no.” I collect data on end-of-semester evaluations to determine whether students believe that my assessments *deprive them* of learning opportunities. I ask students to respond to an item that reads as follows: “I would have learned the course material better if there had been a mid-term and/or final exam.” Table 5 shows the results across twenty course sections from the fall of 2004 through the fall 2007. As can be seen from that table, only thrice did the averages rise above a standard of “disagree” (2.0). In these cases, it only barely surpassed that standard (average = 2.23). Interestingly, in two of the occasions where the



average was above “disagree,” the standard deviations were tied for the highest ones that occurred across the twenty sections.

Semester & Section Number	Number of Students	Average	Standard Deviation
Fall 2004; Section 1	26	1.63	1.04
Fall 2004; Section 2	24	2.23	1.35
Spring 2005, Section 1	30	1.82	1.08
Spring 2005, Section 2	37	1.83	1.11
Summer 2005	26	1.44	.57
Fall 2005, Section 1	25	2.11	1.35
Fall 2005, Section 2	26	1.81	1.23
Spring 2006, Section 1	24	1.73	1.20
Spring 2006, Section 2	26	1.78	.90
Fall 2006, Section 1	24	2.09	1.15
Fall 2006, Section 2	26	1.59	.98
Fall 2006, Section 6	15	1.32	.49
Spring 2007, Section 1	22	1.32	.78
Spring 2007, Section 2	28	1.68	1.09
Spring 2007, Section 5	24	1.58	.88
Summer 2007, Section 1	28	1.61	.83
Summer 2007, Section 2	24	1.33	.56
Fall 2007, Section 1	23	1.39	.50
Fall 2007, Section 2	22	1.73	1.20
Fall 2007, Section 3	26	1.85	.88

Table 5. “I would have learned the course material better if there had been a mid-term and/or final exam.”

Some evidence suggests that the approach to assessment that I describe in this paper contributes to student learning. For example, I ask students about the degree to which they have learned about themselves as learners in my course. Table 6 shows results. Across twenty-five sections, the average ranges from a 3.85 (between “neutral” and “agree”) to a 4.75 (between “agree” and “strongly agree”). Only in 25% of the course sections shown in table 6 did the average drop below a 4.0, which would indicate “agreeing” with the statement. To some extent, then, the metacognitive assessments seem to promote learning.

Semester & Section Number	Number of Students	Average	Standard Deviation
Spring 2003	32	4.09	.89
Fall 2003	25	3.96	.73
Spring 2004, Section 1	27	4.19	.63
Spring 2004, Section 2	30	3.93	.98
Summer 2004	26	4.54	.51
Fall 2004; Section 1	26	4.00	.78
Fall 2004; Section 2	24	4.08	.70
Spring 2005, Section 1	30	3.87	1.06
Spring 2005, Section 2	37	4.08	.82
Summer 2005	26	4.69	.46
Fall 2005, Section 1	25	4.32	.69
Fall 2005, Section 2	26	4.00	.75
Spring 2006, Section 1	24	3.92	.93
Spring 2006, Section 2	26	4.23	.76
Fall 2006, Section 1	24	4.0	.75
Fall 2006, Section 2	26	3.85	.92
Fall 2006, Section 6	15	4.21	1.19
Spring 2007, Section 1	22	4.18	1.05
Spring 2007, Section 2	28	4.14	.85
Spring 2007, Section 5	24	4.0	1.02
Summer 2007, Section 1	28	4.57	.50
Summer 2007, Section 2	24	4.79	.41
Fall 2007, Section 1	23	4.39	.72
Fall 2007, Section 2	22	4.50	.51
Fall 2007, Section 3	26	4.35	.75

Table 6. “I have learned about myself as a learner in this class.”

Along the same lines, I recently began asking students about the degree to which my course has changed the way that they think. Bain (2004) advocates the notion of helping students learn to think within the confines of the discipline. Specifically, I have asked students to respond to an item that gets at the degree to which they have come “to think like an educational psychologist.” Such a question is related to the course’s metacognitive assessments and addresses Covey’s (2006) notion of conceptual, strategic, and interdependent thinking. See table 7. With table 7, it is clear that I have had less success in getting students to think in ways that would be indicative of professionals in the field. Only once has the average risen above a standard of “agree.” The other seven sections in which I have collected this data show averages between “neutral” and “agree.”



Semester & Section Number	Number of Students	Average	Standard Deviation
Spring 2007, Section 1	22	3.55	1.14
Spring 2007, Section 2	28	3.43	.96
Spring 2007, Section 5	24	3.42	1.14
Summer 2007, Section 1	28	3.89	.63
Summer 2007, Section 2	24	4.24	.72
Fall 2007, Section 1	23	3.83	.72
Fall 2007, Section 2	22	3.82	.73
Fall 2007, Section 3	26	3.54	.86

Table 7. “Because of this class, I tend to ‘think like an Educational Psychologist.’”

In spite of the lack of success as shown in table 8, tables 7 and 8 together, show some degree of learning gain. These two tables seem to provide some evidence that the approaches to assessment that I have described result in learning that goes beyond what can be reported on a test.

Removing Traditional Grading Systems from the Classroom

I have determined that traditional letter grades (e.g., A, B, C, D, F) and point systems (e.g., exam #1 is worth 20 points while exam #2 is worth 30), in themselves, undermine learning. I have many anecdotes to support such a statement, but my favorite one was a conversation among a group of students that I overheard in my university’s dining facilities during the fall of 2006. A group of students was sitting around a table “studying” for a biology exam. As I eavesdropped on their conversation, however, much of their discussion was not about the content of the exam. Instead, they were discussing the number of points that they needed on the exam to reach the minimum threshold for a “B” in the course. After listening to this conversation for a few minutes, I wondered how long the discussion of exam points and letter grades would take precedent over the discussion of Biology content. I started my stop watch. Twenty-five minutes later, those students were still discussing point values and indeed had completed calculations in long hand. From the conversation, I infer that their calculations included already-completed points and an unknown variable of exam points. I wondered the obvious: What if these students had invested that time toward studying Biology? Would their learning have been more substantive?

I have been involved in similar anecdotes, such as students asking me how many points they need to earn on a project to get a “B” in the class. I am astounded, humiliated, and embarrassed at the number of times over my twenty-year teaching career that I have been complicit in perpetuating the emphasis on letter grades and points at the expense of student learning. At one time, I would sit in my office with students teaching them how to calculate their grade. On more than one occasion, I even distributed step-by-step instructions that taught students how to calculate their grade. It is behavior of mine that I now find wrong-headed and obnoxious, if not educationally reprehensible.

These experiences combined with Covey’s (2006) view of staying on a high learning curve led me to a pivotal moment in shifting my epistemology and having the desire to create a more meaningful classroom experience: If the goal is to promote student learning, then

traditional grading approaches (both letter grades and quantitative measurements) should be removed from classroom discourse and practices. In terms of discourse, I no longer discuss with students “what it takes to get an ‘A.’” Rather, feedback and dialogue are geared toward the goal of helping students improve their own learning. In terms of practices, I have avoided using traditional grades on some types of assignments for many years. As of the summer of 2007, my undergraduate students no longer receive a traditional grade or points on *any* assignment. They do see markings of various types that I draw on their work as a summary indication of my perceptions of quality: smiley faces and frowns or check marks, plus signs, and minuses. Students routinely report to me that they impose a more familiar grade upon these markings—a plus sign surely means an “A” while a “check” equals a “B.” I go to great lengths to point out to them that they are making assumptions, and their efforts would be better placed on thinking about the course content, their own learning, and the qualitative feedback that they receive on assignments.

In appendix A of this paper, I have included excerpts from my now-standard handout on grading that I include in my educational psychology syllabus. Perhaps it could serve as a starting point for other faculty members who agree with my argument that removing measurements and traditional grades from the classroom environment rightly will place a stronger emphasis on student learning and create a classroom milieu where process is valued over a graded product. Both students and faculty members have suggested to me that the approach that I outline within this paper and within Appendix A is unethical. On the contrary, I argue that using traditional grades and points may well erode academic ethics; removing letter grades and points, however, can restore a level of ethics by emphasizing learning over administrative book keeping.

I routinely collect data about my students’ attitudes on this issue of grading. Table 8 shows my educational psychology students’ opinions on two five-point Likert-Scale items. The question represented in the third column (“grade over learning”) was phrased as follows: “When it comes right down to it, I am more interested in my grade than I am in learning.” The question represented in the fourth column (“Actual Grades”) was phrased this way: “I would have learned the course material better if [the course professor] had put actual grades on [assignments].” These items reflect students’ opinions about the role of grades in relation to their learning. In considering both of these questions, only once did the averages rise to a standard of being “neutral” on the item. These results seem to suggest that students are more interested in learning than a grade. Furthermore, it seems that students feel that, on average, my removal of points and traditional grades does not negatively influence student learning.

Semester Number	& Section	Number of Students	Question Averages (Standard Deviations)	
			Grade Over Learning	Actual Grades
Fall 2006, Section 1		24	2.5 (1.1)	2.8 (1.43)
Fall 2006, Section 2		26	3.0 (1.28)	2.6 (1.24)
Fall 2006, Section 6		15	1.9 (.59)	2.3 (1.18)
Spring 2007, Section 1		22	2.45 (1.06)	2.41 (1.01)
Spring 2007, Section 2		28	2.46 (1.00)	2.25 (1.00)
Spring 2007, Section 5		24	2.54 (1.14)	2.33 (1.13)



Summer 2007, Section 1	28	2.43 (.84)	1.86 (.71)
Summer 2007, Section 2	24	2.30 (.76)	1.54 (.59)
Fall 2007, Section 1	23	1.74 (.81)	2.09 (.90)
Fall 2007, Section 2	22	2.73 (1.08)	2.55 (1.14)
Fall 2007, Section 3	26	2.46 (1.10)	2.54 (1.30)

Table 8. Students' Opinions about Removing Grades from the Classroom.

Recently, as a part of a peer review process, I extracted from my end-of-semester evaluations all open-ended comments that dealt with my approach to grading practices. These extractions came from two sections of Educational Psychology that I taught during the fall of 2008. A full analysis of these comments is beyond the scope of this paper. Still, an overview can provide some important insight into students' reactions to the grading approach that I have described. Out of two sections of the course, twenty-four comments on end-of-semester evaluations used the word "grade," or some variation thereof. Out of these twenty-four comments, four comments had a negative view of my approach. One student noted that there was "a lot of work" inherent to "trying to figure out" the grading system." Another thought that there should be "a little more focus on grades because it's hard to tell between a minus, check, and plus."

Twenty of these twenty-four comments, however, were much more positive. Importantly, many of the students who offered positive comments did suggest that they would *like* to know their grades on various assignments, but I think that we must distinguish between what students prefer and what fosters their learning. Thirteen responses about grades were offered under an open-ended question that asked about the "strengths" and "advantages" of the course. One student noted that "[l]eaving off the grades gives students less stress and allows them to concentrate on learning." Another student noted that the course was designed to provide "freedom to find [students' own] answers instead of being pressured to find the 'correct' answer for a grade." A third comment also encapsulated the general theme that emerged through most of the comments: "I love the fact the 'grades' were not the main concern, but learning was the goal. I have always thought this, and it was refreshing to see a college professor take this approach."

Implications

In this paper, I have shared my journey through a three-phase progression. This progression began with solidifying an epistemological shift in thinking based on the ideas of Covey (2006). That epistemological shift and discussion of Covey served as a theoretical framework for the remaining two phases of the progression. I noted that making Covey's ideas fully operational could not be achieved by simply changing the classroom environment in a scholarly and academic way; instead, the epistemological shift that I inferred from Covey's ideas could only be set in motion through a more ethereal change in classroom milieu. To this end, I described four changes to the classroom milieu that I implemented in an educational psychology course. Implications for research and teaching are vast. The following discussion addresses a few of these implications.

The first implication can best be stated as a series of rhetorical questions for faculty members: Is there congruence between your own epistemology and the environment of your

classroom? Do your instructional strategies align with the intentions of the environment? In total, do your epistemology, environment, and strategies result in student learning? If the answer to any of these questions is “no,” then faculty members must make adjustments to their classroom environment—if not reinvent the entire milieu. Certainly, such adjustments or reinventions may not make professors popular with students. In fact, Speck (1998a) notes that when professors focus solidly on student learning “they will probably confuse students, even anger them, because the teachers will cease to dish out right answers to canned questions [...and these professors] set themselves in opposition to much that...authority figures will say about the role of the teacher” (p. 36). Perhaps this paper can serve as guidance to help make the adjustments and reinventions less contentious.

Certainly, faculty members who follow the three-phased progression described in this paper will be creating opportunities for additional scholarship about teaching and learning within higher education classrooms. For example, for ease of explication, this paper describes the three phases as a linear progression. It is not linear, and additional careful accounts are needed about the ways that professors embrace new epistemologies and translate those epistemological beliefs into practice. Such accounts might emphasize the curvilinear and iterative nature of negotiating these phases.

The primary purpose of this article was not empirical analysis; still, I supplemented my explanations and arguments in favor of reinventing my classroom milieu with data from end-of-semester evaluations. While not empirically robust, this data is consistent with research on student evaluations to the extent that the research suggests that students are not particularly proficient in judging the value of professor behaviors; students are quite good, however, in examining and evaluating their own learning (Kaplan, Mets, & Cook, 2000; Seldin, 1999). Perhaps the types of evaluation questions that are reported within this paper can guide other faculty members who are interested in collecting data about student learning and attitudes toward various classroom interventions.

More broadly, the use of evaluations as described in this paper is related to faculty governance over tenure and promotion criteria for teaching. If administrators insist on having end-of-semester student evaluations (and they will), then faculty members should ensure that the questions focus on student learning, not on ancillary issues. I reject the view that asking students to rate a faculty-member’s likeability is related to student learning. I find it simply laughable that we should ask students to compare a faculty member to others that they have had. To ask such questions is a clear indicator that one has not considered the literature on student evaluations and their legitimate use as a feedback tool for individual faculty members.

The implications discussed so far are relatively concrete and practical. This paper does have implications that are more conceptual and abstract. For example, perhaps one implication of this paper might be related to the potential (and limitations) of the language that we use within our own pedagogical conceptualizations. As I noted, one reason that Covey (2006) appealed to me is because of his non-scholarly use of language—“inspire them,” “unique talent and passion,” “security...from within,” and “not afraid of leaving their comfort zone.” This language appealed to me and opened my thinking and analysis of classrooms in ways that traditional academic literature did not. Similarly, consider the argument from this paper about the connotations of the



word “milieu” as indicative of changing the “ambiance” and “vibe” of a classroom. All three of these words are not commonly found within pedagogical literature; and, in fact, more than one colleague has suggested to me that my use of these words within an earlier draft of this article was “awkward,” “uncomfortable,” and “seem[ed] out of place within scholarly discourse.” Yet, reconsidering a classroom using these non-scholarly terms offered me a dimension of understanding my own epistemology and intentions that more traditional language—“classroom environment” or “classroom procedures”—seemed to limit.

As a final example, consider the point about “grading” in this paper. In a non-scholarly sense, the word “grading” might imply any form of judgment regarding student work; thus, my use of any marking—even a smiley face drawn at the end of a particularly interesting paragraph—is a type of “grade.” But, perhaps as pedagogues, we should be more discerning in our understanding of various terminology. Indeed, “[i]nstructors sometimes view evaluating, grading, marking, providing feedback, assessing, and commenting as synonymous processes, but each term comes with value-laden assumptions, biases, and connotations” (Knowlton & Knowlton, 2003). As an illustration of the value-laden assumptions within language, Speck (1998b) notes that grading is a monolithic concept: “[G]rading includes, but is not limited to, the professor’s subjective professional judgment of students’ efforts” (p. 18-19). By shifting our language away from grading, professors do more than adjust syntax. Those professors are making changes that support a classroom environment that is more conducive to learning.

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Appendix A

Grading in Educational Psychology

In a perfect world, we wouldn't have to worry about grades; we could just all assume that we'd each do our best work and aim for the goal of "learning" (which is very different from aiming for a goal of a high grade). It's not a perfect world, and part of my professional responsibility is to give you a grade at the end of the semester. So, how will we deal with grades in this class?

I've always been intrigued by a story of a college professor. The college professor's name was Phaedrus, and his story is told in a cult classic novel called *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (Bantam Books, 1981). Part of the story has to do with Phaedrus' approach to grading.

"All (semester) long papers would go back to the students with comments but no grades, although the grades were entered into a book" (p. 177).

This is the approach that I will take in this class. If I do my job well, you will never see a traditional grade on an assignment until you log on to CougarNet at semester's end.

Why in the world would I take such an approach? Well, let's look at why Phaedrus took this approach:

"Grades [according to Phaedrus] really cover up a failure to teach. A bad instructor can go through an entire quarter leaving absolutely nothing memorable in the minds of his class, curve out the scores on an irrelevant test, and leave the impression that some have learned and some have not. But if the grades are removed, the class is forced to wonder each day what it's *really* learning. The questions, What's being taught? What's the goal? How do the lectures and assignments accomplish the goal? become ominous. The removal of grades exposes a huge and frightening vacuum" (p. 179).

I think that being sucked into this vacuum is a good thing, and it can help us think differently about what we are doing throughout the semester. (It also can help us think about issues surrounding grading in k-12 classrooms, as well.) There was another reason that Phaedrus removed grades from his classroom:

"He had wanted his students to become creative by deciding for themselves what was good [thinking] instead of asking him all the time. The real purpose of withholding grades was to force them to look within themselves, the only place they would ever get a real right answer" (p. 179-180).

Maybe some of you are thinking that this approach "sounds scary." Do you think that Phaedrus' students handled it well?

"[Most students] probably figured they were stuck with some idealist who thought removal of grades would make them happier and thus work harder. . . . One student laid



it wide open when she said with complete candor, ‘Of course you can’t eliminate [grades]. After all, that’s what we’re here for’” (p. 174).

Is she right? Is that what you’re here for—a grade? Are you really here for a little marking on a piece of paper that is shaped like the top of a pyramid with a line drawn perpendicularly across it? I hope that that’s *not* why you are here.

I hope you are here to learn, and learning is what I hope that your final grade will reflect. Admittedly, it is hard (maybe even impossible) for a grade to reflect “learning.” After all, I can’t climb into your brain and see how your knowledge and thoughts have changed. Your course grade will represent my professional judgments of the degree to which you have “shown” your learning.

Let me offer a few general comments for maximizing, monitoring, and understanding your grade:

- The “default” grade in this course is a “B.” I assume that you will do “good work.” The grade of an “A” is reserved for those rare individuals who do exceptional work and go above and beyond to communicate their preparation and show their dedication to this course.
- While feedback and various markings that you receive on your work (like + and √) are not perfectly correlated with a grade, they do give you indication about the quality of your work, and thus an appropriate grade. Therefore, you should consider that at the point of your third minus, the markings are starting to have some negative impact on your grade. (By about your fifth minus in a category of assignments, that negative impact on your grade is growing strong.) If after your third minus, you don’t make an appointment to talk with me about the quality of your work, I can only assume that (a) you understand why your grade might be lowered based on the quality of your work and (b) you accept the judgments of your work as fair and accurate. Therefore, I’m guilt free when I give you a lower grade.



National Standards: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

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Introduction

Educators in the United States continue to struggle with the disparity in academic achievement of their students and with the ever-increasing emphasis on meeting Adequate Yearly Progress, for No Child Left Behind. Looking at data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the Education Trust concluded that, “By the time [minority students] reach grade 12, if they do so at all, minority students are about four years behind other young people” (National Governors Association, 2003, p. 2). From this struggle, the topic of national standards has risen to the forefront. National standards appear to be a solution to the inequities between individual state standards and a way to provide equitable learning opportunities for all students. National standards could also provide educators with an opportunity to measure and compare the United States and other nations. However, common standards could mean state governments and local school boards, within local school districts, could lose control over the curriculum. If the adoption of national standards became reality, a national assessment would have to follow. This controversial issue has become relevant for not only teachers and administrators but for the entire country. The debate is not new; over 50 years ago, President Dwight D. Eisenhower announced a need for national goals (Carmichael, Wilson, Finn, Winkler, & Palmieri, 2009). In the 1990s, attempts at voluntary national standards and assessments were proposed but never materialized due to political pressure (Toch, 2009).

What is meant by the term ‘standards’? This article will use the definition of the National Academy of Sciences for their workshop on Assessing the Role of K-12 Academic Standards, “generally used to refer to both content standards, which describe material that students should be expected to learn, and performance standards, which describe the level of proficiency or mastery expected of students...Most state standards specify both” (Beatty, 2008, p. 2). NCLB theoretically aligns state standardized assessments with that particular state’s standards and thus, teachers are required to use them for instructional planning, especially as states release curriculum frameworks, becoming more and more specific about what concepts are being taught and how they will be assessed.

Much like current state standards, national standards could provide for each state specific guidelines on which to develop individual school district curricula in each content area. In their report *The State of State Standards*, Finn, Julian, and Petrilli (2006) claimed, although over half of states have replaced their standards and even more revised them, “state academic standards are no better in 2006 than they were six years earlier. And far too many of them are unsatisfactory” (p. 9). It is the authors’ viewpoint that NCLB has not served to improve state



standards and may even encourage states to lower their level of proficiency on tests. Alignment of assessments to the state standards also remains an issue, especially for the classroom teachers who may be left to interpret poorly written curriculum. There are no indicators to support that national standards will lead to an increase of student achievement. “Much of the impetus behind national standards has little to do with evidence or any sort of inherent national-standards superiority...it’s about No Child Left Behind” (McCluskey, 2009, para.11).

The difference is in who develops the standards. Many national teacher organizations that focus in particular content areas already have in place a set of national standards, such as mathematics or language arts, created by their national professional associations, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics for example. However, there is no mandate for the use of these national standards at this time, and they function more as suggestions for best practice in each subject area. In addition, there are standards for technology integration, standards for professional development, and standards for National Board Certified Teachers.

The concept of national standards has been in use in other countries for decades. In a report by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, the development of national standards in eleven other nations was examined (Schmidt, Houang, & Shakrani, 2009). While the United States is undoubtedly unique, there is much to learn from the challenges and successes of other nations. One aspect of the current national standards movement that must be resolved is who will be responsible for overseeing state implementation of these “common core” standards and from where the funding will come. For better or worse, the national standards movement in this country has reached the point of no return.

Recently, the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers met with several other organizations, including ACT Inc. and the College Board, to compose a draft of national standards for English language arts and mathematics, the “common core.” While this draft is still preliminary, the movement for national standards has become a reality. The released draft, titled *College and Career Ready*, has been both criticized and praised by varying groups. In addition, the website for the Common Core standards stated in the Frequently Asked Questions section, “Are these national standards? No. This initiative is driven by collective state action and states will voluntarily adopt the standards based on the timeline and context in their state” (NGA, CCSSO, 2009, p. 2). Despite these assurances, the first focus of Race to the Top, a federally funded, competitive grant program for states, is “adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace to compete in the global economy” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a, Program Description section). Although adoption of the standards are not technically mandatory, federal funding is clearly tied to their implementation. Thus the draft of these standards and the consequences of their adoption should be carefully evaluated.

Current National Standards Movement

At present, each state has its own set of standards, ‘grade level expectations,’ ‘curriculum frameworks,’ and a variety of other documents designed to aid in implementation of curriculum aligned to the standards; which are theoretically aligned with the state assessment. The time and expense to create the standards documents as well as develop and score the state assessments is

considerable. This, in fact, is what led New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont, and later Maine in 2009, to band together to create the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP), which includes both Grade Level Expectations and common assessments for all three states (Barton, 2009, p. 11). However, the Race to the Top federal grant competition does not allow consortiums to apply (U.S. Department of Education, 2010b) which may eliminate other attempts at state cooperation.

National standards for most content areas do exist as written by national teacher organizations, pioneered by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Even generating these voluntary standards has caused debate and controversy; as evident by the Congressional debate over history standards in 1990 (Barton, 2009, p. 30). Advanced Placement exams, given nationally, are another example of national tests, but these are high school focused content area assessments. However, all AP teachers receive a syllabus from the national organization with objectives to cover, and their students are assessed nationally with colleges accepting certain scores on these exams as credit for courses. Therefore, the success of this set of national assessments may rest with the motivation students have for performing well on the test rather than the design of the objectives and assessment itself. As opposed to NCLB mandated assessments, students are rewarded for high performance instead of punished for low scores on tests that may mean little to individual students.

The motivation for performance on standardized tests varies by state. In some states, students must earn certain scores before being promoted to the next grade level or before graduating from high school. Twenty-four states currently use high school exit exams to meet NCLB assessment requirements (Zhang, 2009). In others, there are only consequences for the teachers and schools for failure to improve. The impact of high stakes testing on students has been widely debated in the literature, and little evidence has found increased achievement when compared with similar standardized tests such as NAEP.

NAEP, or Nation's Report Card as it is commonly called, is a trusted assessment of American student's achievement across the country. The purpose of NAEP is to track student achievement trends longitudinally since its inception during the 1970s. However, not all students in the country take this assessment, only a representative sample. Only students in grades 4, 8, and 12 take these tests. The frameworks of the National Assessment Governing Board in the areas of mathematics, reading, science, writing, the arts, civics, economics, geography, and U.S. History (Center for Education Statistics, 2009) form the base for NAEP.

An argument in support of national standards and a national assessment would be the money and time saved for each individual state to develop standards, curriculum frameworks, grade level expectations, and assessments. However, the populations of each state vary and common national standards may not reflect this diversity. While national standards may allow for a more direct comparison from state to state, the varying demographics, funding, and resources available in different geographic regions may make comparisons unfair. Tests given at the end of a school year tell teachers little about the strengths and weaknesses of their particular students (Barton, 2009).



Many researchers have questioned the quality of each state's standards and the alignment of the assessments to the respective standards (Barton, 2009). State Departments of Education walk a fine line between seeking teacher input into standards and assessments and ensuring reliability and validity as defined by the psychometric community. A simple expansion of the list of standards may make all shareholders happy, making it virtually impossible for a classroom teacher to meet all of them in a single year. Plus, "the impact of curriculum on teaching or of teaching on learning is radically indirect, since it relies on the cooperation of teachers and students whose individual goals, urges, and capacities play a large and indeterminate role in shaping the outcome" (Larabee, 2004, p. 65). Curriculum that works in one state or school may not be as successful in another for a multitude of reasons; some quantifiable and some not.

No matter how many documents a state Department of Education produces, implementation of the curriculum occurs at the classroom level. If teachers are not implementing state curriculums now, why will national standards make any difference in the future? When students walk into a classroom without the prerequisite knowledge, teachers may be forced choose to vary from the mandated curriculum to meet student needs (Barton, 2009). Uncertified teachers may not be able to teach to the standards adequately, either because they lack content knowledge or pedagogical knowledge. Perhaps the focus should move from standards to the teachers and their training.

Standards based reform is also evident in preservice teacher education, and even these standards vary from state to state. While some states mandate accreditation by the National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), others have their own process. However, increasing costs for accreditation and decreasing budgets have led some teacher education programs to forego national accreditation altogether. The state qualifications for certifying teachers, which often involve a standardized test such as the PRAXIS, may not align with the national organization's (either NCATE or subject area) expectations for assessment at the program level. When so many standards exist, they may not align with each other, causing confusion and misdirection for teachers.

National standards for students must go hand in hand with standards both for training preservice teachers and for evaluating current teachers. Thus, national teacher certification might be another step on the journey to true common standards. Like the content area standards developed by national organizations such as NCTM, National Board Certification for teachers is "available but optional" (Barton, 2009, p. 28). This rigorous, expensive process involving portfolios and constructed response assessments (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, n.d.) aligned with standards for each content area and age level. Like common assessments for students, perhaps national standards could lead to a common, national assessment and process for teacher certification.

National Standards, Increased Standardization

The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (2008) listed the United States as the number one country in the development of patents. This number one status validates American development in the skills of creativity and innovation. As the momentum to increase standardization develops by creating a national set of curriculum standards, the process of standardizing instruction within classrooms will increase. Teachers in the classroom will finally lose what little ability they had to

differentiate and meet individual needs; there will be a decrease in opportunities for our secondary students to exchange ideas, think critically and problem solve. This country was founded on the engagement of creative questioning and individualism so why would politicians want to increase the standardization of knowledge in a country that was founded on these principles? In the authors' experience, one size does not fit all in education.

Standardization began with President Bush's vision played out in the federal law of No Child Left Behind, the purpose of which was to implement high expectations and close the achievement gap for those who were non-achieving. A noble goal at best, it was the beginning of accountability and the denouncement of the phrase, fair does not mean equal. Teaching became focused on assessment not on instruction; the process of filling in a bubble test score sheet (disregarding the fact of cognitive ability or knowledge) and began the process of altering the paradigm of educational success. Those politicians outside the school were now acting as if they were inside the classroom by making requirements focused not on children but embedded in the political process and far away from the bell that rings on Monday morning.

The money to be made from standardizing curriculum nationally cannot be overlooked. Currently, textbook publishers align with each individual state standards and tests. However, one curriculum and one test would streamline this process. Some argue that this has occurred already:

Although states prize their autonomy and flexibility in developing systems that will best serve their students, many nevertheless base much of their instruction on commercially available programs that have very little link with state standards. These programs are often design to provide so-called 'teacher-proof' curricula and instructional plans and thus do very little to develop the capacities of the teachers who use them or to push the state-specific education goals forward. (Beatty, 2008, p. 16)

The Center on Education Policy report acknowledged that a review of the longitudinal data of the federal law, No Child Left Behind, has spurred the increase of math and reading achievement in underachieving students (2007). However, the authors of this article question the origination of that growth. Students are closing the gap not from an increase in standardization but the paradigm shift to holding ourselves accountable and measuring what matters; accountability not standardization is the impetus for an increase in achievement. Teachers are beginning to use data in instructional planning and now have access to many different types of data related to student achievement, so their teaching is data driven. Technology has made it easier for instant results from assessments to be available inexpensively. Increases in student achievement cannot entirely be attributed to the implementation of high stakes testing.

Standardization and the creation of a national curriculum is developed under the auspices that all children can win the race at the same time. Holding American schools to the ideal that each child can win the race at the same time, in the same way, on the same day is unachievable. All children can learn but they are individuals who come to school with varying backgrounds and instructional foundations. Ruby Payne (1995) quotes Hodgkinson in her bestselling book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, "Low achievement is closely correlated with lack of resources and numerous studies have documented the correlation of low socioeconomic status and low achievement" (p. 87). Many students who are underperforming are children in poverty (Lips, 2006). Instead of putting funds into the creation of a national curriculum and increased



standardization, the focus should be shifting to providing those underlying foundational resources so students come to school better prepared to win the race along with the continual efforts to hold ourselves accountable for the learning of our students.

Globalization and Standardization

Thomas Friedman (2007) wrote that the world has now gone flat. Flat in the sense that through an increase of interconnectivity and a diffusion of boundaries (Scholte, 2005) the process of globalization is requiring “us to act” (p. 1). The national standards movement is the government’s response the ever-increasing competition in knowledge we are sensing from other nations, particularly China. There is no doubt that globalization has leveled the playing field and increased competition with other countries. Keith Baker in his study that researched the “relationship between the results of the First International Mathematics Study and the 11 participating countries success in terms of national wealth, rate of growth, individual productivity, quality of life, livability, democracy and creativity 40 years later” (Zhao, 2009) found no correlation between these factors and student achievement. If the focus of the United States Department of Education is to increase student achievement that will result in a better economic future, the research does not support their current actions of moving to national standards.

In Linda Darling Hammond’s recently published text *The Flat World and Education* (2010), she noted, “Education reform must be student-focused...to develop the potential and personalities of students. This student-focused spirit underlines the education and curriculum reforms, improvement to the learning environment and enhancement of teacher training” (p. 1). As the United States continues to move towards increased levels of standardization, other nations are moving in exactly the opposite direction. As we look to them for current effective methods of curriculum design and implementation, they are looking to us, the leaders in ideas. Only time will tell which nation has placed into practice the methods to increase student achievement.

The Future of National Standards

“States know that standards alone cannot propel the systems change we need...A common assessment system will include multiple forms of assessment so that what a student knows and can do, not the form of the assessment, determines performance” (NGA, CCSSO, 2009, p. 3). Common assessments could help alleviate the costs associated with each state writing their own test. A national test would theoretically be of higher quality than the variety of state tests currently in use. However, many questions remain unanswered about who would write the test, how it would be formatted, who would score the test and how quickly, when the test was offered, and if it would be multiple choice or constructed response.

One concern about the current group writing the common standards document is the representatives from The College Board and ACT. These companies could potentially make a large profit writing a national assessment or marketing an existing one for this purpose. However, the contracting of national tests to companies is nothing new, and perhaps the expertise in validity and reliability of these companies is needed.

Opinions of the draft national standards document are mixed. The National Council of Teachers of English has yet to endorse them, and the language arts standards seem to be more controversial than those of math, perhaps because of the nature of the subject area:

The drafters have done a praiseworthy job of defining essential competencies in reading, writing, and speaking and listening for success in both college and the workplace... These skill-centric standards however, do not suffice to frame a complete English or language arts curriculum. Proper standards for English must also provide enough content guidance to help teachers instill not just useful skills, but also imagination, wonder, and a deep appreciation for our literary heritage. (Carmichael, et al., 2009, p. 1)

This same report, funded by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, suggests further recommendations for the mathematics content area:

The draft covers most of the critical content and is coherent, organized, and clearly written. However, the standards are not explicit enough in how they address the arithmetic of rational numbers. Further, they do not set priorities high means that readers are unable to discern which standards should be given more or less attention than others. As a result, many standards that will contribute little to college readiness are given equal status with standards that are essential foundations. (Carmichael, et al., 2009, p.2)

Thus, the creators of these standards must continue to revise and involve a variety of stakeholders in this process. Perhaps a pilot program, with a small number of states, could be implemented to study what effect the national standards implementation had on schools and students, as well as on achievement. “Because everything (including curriculum, textbooks, development of assessments, language for reporting results to the public) flows from the standards, they need not only to be clearly written and concise, but also to reflect current understanding of how children learn” (Beatty, 2008, p. 6). Simply writing the standards is not enough. Standards are only as good as the paper they’re written on if teachers and schools do not use them in the classroom.

Conclusion

As the discussion of National Standards continues to increase in national and state politics, teacher unions, and national content organizations and by administrators and teachers in the local school districts, American educators need to remain skeptical. The field of education has been known in the past for jumping on the latest school reform initiative without taking the much-needed time to complete research and focus on the underlying reasons for student’s inability to academically achieve. However, in his book *The Trouble With Ed Schools*, David Labaree (2004) noted the difficulties of educational research, as well as the specific challenges professors of education face. “Educational researchers are able at best to make tentative and highly contingent claims that are difficult to sustain in the face of alternative claims by other researchers” (p. 65). Thus, often educators have little true “research-based” practice to rely on, since experimental studies are often not feasible or ethical in this field. Yet, educators must be able to collect valid data for their respective contexts to evaluate the effectiveness of programs designed to improve student achievement.

Educators’ novice ability to make data based decisions grounded in research has led them down too many paths and left students weary. National standards have the possibility of creating common outcomes on achievement and performance assessments; yet a variety of different types



of educational reforms are being considered. We must never forget that students are individuals with unique possibilities; moving towards an increase in national standardization might just be moving this country in a direction that impedes the development of these unique possibilities. Undoubtedly, educators are already overwhelmed with a long list of standards from various organizations. Will one more list of standards make the difference for students?

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Critical Pedagogy and the Teaching of Reading for Social Action

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Introduction

When the teacher asked the students “What did the author mean?” I blushed. Did she actually know what the author meant? – because I didn’t.

More often than not, teachers like the one I was observing that day ask students to read and find the right answer, the one and only meaning of a text, as if reading were about uncovering one particular truth that a writer had established. Teaching reading as deciphering or guessing what writers mean does not seem to be the appropriate route to developing reading skills. In practice, one cannot know the author’s intentions or messages unless the author is there to guide readers in the process. What we, as readers, can do is create our own meanings based on the ways we understand and interpret what we read or, at the very least, reconstruct meaning by using the clues that an author gives us.

Reading is not a guessing game, some kind of treasure hunt where teachers reward the student who can rescue the “original” meaning of a text. Moreover, there is no such thing as original meaning that needs to be salvaged from incorrect or misguided interpretations. One cannot say that reading is not about getting meaning, though. People do read to get information and to expand their knowledge. However, much of the meaning of reading has to do with assigning meaning. Reading is an interactive process and meaning is constructed as a result of the dialogue between a text and a reader (Rosenblatt, 1996).

Reading teachers, novice or experienced, face the hard task of having to teach students how to read by moving beyond the mere “surface level” of reading (finding meanings in the text) into a more critical perspective (assigning meaning to what is being read). Many teachers struggle in trying to reconcile these two perspectives as they teach learners how to read. In addition, teachers also struggle with assessment, particularly as it relates to the expected outcomes of reading. Instead of being evaluated based on what the students consider relevant and meaningful (what the text means to the students), students are evaluated on what teachers expect them to take from a reading activity (what the teachers think the text should mean).

In this article, I will explore the contributions of critical pedagogy to the teaching of reading and discuss an approach that helps learners move beyond the level of comprehension and use what they have learned in reading towards engaging in some kind of social action. I argue that, for reading to be effective and purposeful for both teachers and students, there needs to be a concrete connection between the text and the real world, and that this connection can be achieved through encouraging social action.



Critical Pedagogy and the Teaching of Reading

Reading has been used in classrooms both as a tool for language development and as a way of supplementing and extending content area knowledge (Rudman, 1993; Smallwood, 2004). In order to develop the ability to read, learners need to be taught not only to understand what is presented in a text (comprehension), but to activate their previous knowledge, make comparisons and connections (analysis), and create new knowledge (synthesis).

A critical approach to the teaching of reading involves the search for multiple possible interpretations and requires that teachers stimulate differences in the way readers relate to a text. Equally important, learning to read a text critically requires developing an awareness of how the themes that students read can lead to individual and collective transformation.

Paulo Freire (1970) hit a nerve when he elaborated on the dichotomy of students as subjects as opposed to objects of their own learning process. In contrast to more traditional or conservative approaches to education that are based on rote learning and that do not encourage the development of critical thinking skills or creativity in the classroom, the idea that students should take a stance and express their own beliefs and views towards the material at hand must have sounded revolutionary. Approaches like this, which essentially constitute students as objects, deny learners the opportunity to become engaged in their own learning. Teachers silence any other voice but theirs, and reading becomes an activity of finding the meanings the teacher expects students to find – the right answers, the one accepted interpretation.

A critical approach to education, on the other hand, highlights the importance of having learners actively engaged in their learning process and being able to find and develop their opinions and positions (Freire, 2005). Even for teachers who believe that to be true, however, there still seems to be a distance between this philosophical orientation and the actual classroom practice. Freire (1992) believed that for the learner to move from *object* to *subject*, he or she needed to be involved in dialogical action with the teacher and the materials being studied. Dialogical action has two basic dimensions, reflection and action. Freire's view is visually expressed through the following function: Action + Reflection = word = work = praxis.

In transposing this "formula" to the teaching of reading, teachers need to encourage learners to reflect on what they read, create and discuss possible interpretations, and move toward some kind of action based on what is read. In the Freirean praxis, the word is the precursor to work and that is the ultimate purpose of becoming a reader. Engaging in critical reflection requires "moving beyond the acquisition of new knowledge and understanding, into questioning existing assumptions, values, and perspectives" (Cranton 1996, p. 76). Assisting learners in undertaking critical reflection is a frequently espoused aim of education (Bright, 1996; Brookfield, 1994) but it is a goal that is not easily achieved.

For Freire (2002), literacy is a political act. In a democratic society, schools serve as the place where students learn to become informed citizens. Schools empower learners toward participation and action by teaching them how to listen, how to identify alternatives, how to consider possibilities and how to search for multiple possible answers. From this perspective, reading is a libertarian activity and not an action of conformity (Freire, 1992). In and outside the

classroom, the political awareness that one gains through assigning meanings to the knowledge one brings into the school leads further to the dissemination of that knowledge and to the production of new knowledge.

Freire's political-pedagogical discourse reveals an interconnectedness between the social and the political being. In fact, his well known problem-posing framework is a result of this concern of education being associated with people learning how to solve daily problems collectively and collaboratively. As established through the idea of dialogical action, critical pedagogy presupposes the teaching and learning of words and actions. This means that a sound critical pedagogical practice needs to focus on identifying and discussing problems that affect a certain community, and it will only result in transformation if accompanied by some kind of action (Freire, 2006). The power of knowledge and the ability to question and reflect should be seen as an essential tool to intervene in the world (Gadotti, 2005). Through cooperation, dialogic subjects are able to "focus their attention on the reality which mediates them and which—posed as a problem—challenges them. The response to that challenge is the action of dialogical subjects upon reality in order to transform it" (Freire, 1970, p. 149).

The teaching of reading is an appropriate vehicle for teachers to help learners develop critical thinking skills (Krashen, 2004), a way to enable students to develop reasoning and argumentative skills, and a means to learn to express their opinions in socially acceptable ways (Naiditch, 2006). Reading approaches like the one described in the introduction of this article, where the teacher asks students to identify the author's intended meanings, personify Freire's criticism of "banking" education where learners are constituted as repositories to be filled with information by a teacher, who embodies both official knowledge and the established authority (Apple, 2000).

Many teachers would choose this *one-way-street approach* (Naiditch, 2003) to reading as a way of establishing authority and hierarchy in the classroom. This often results from a need to preserve control and maintain the teacher's sense of security. Established curricula often provide rigid scripts for content and teachers often feel pressured to "get through" the material. In addition, many teachers are not prepared to deal with diversity of opinions and pluralism in the classroom and prefer to have students search for the one "correct" answer. These kinds of teachers are the ones who usually choose a top-down approach to education (Senge, 1990) and do not see their classroom as an arena for learning and practicing democracy. Students who are taught to find the expected or the acceptable answer echo Freire's own observations as he developed his approach to the teaching of literacy under Brazil's military regime.

In fact, for learners who are taught under such circumstances, the idea of one only way of looking at the world goes beyond learning how to read; it is part of what is considered their official history: one only widely accepted possible interpretation of world events. In his well known motto of reading the word as a metaphor for reading the world (Freire & Macedo, 2001), Freire argued for multiple voices to co-exist in the classroom. These voices represent not only pluralism or diversity, but the actual existence and acknowledgment of multiple identities in the classroom that need to be affirmed, recognized, valued and respected.



A critical approach to the teaching of reading, thus, looks at learners as *subjects* who need to be empowered to elaborate on and express their views. Reading becomes as much about getting information as it is about assigning meanings and creating interpretations based on what is presented. This does not mean that, in reading a text, anything goes. Interpretation needs to be based on facts presented in a text and students need to learn how to develop points of view based on reality. However, reality is a much broader concept than what some teachers would like to think and it encompasses each individual student and the personal and collective histories in a classroom.

The Freirean praxis presupposes a shared dialogue of experiences among educators and students in order to understand social, political, and economic context as well as creating new knowledge and possible solutions for the challenges one faces. From a critical perspective, the teaching of reading should reflect Freire's praxis of exercising dialogue as a way of potentially transforming social condition. Teaching students to read critically requires strengthening the dyad 'comprehension-action' (Freire, 1992) in the Freirean approach and assessing its effectiveness in transforming the relationship between teacher, student, text, and knowledge.

The classroom, therefore, becomes a locus for the generation of knowledge and action. It is a participatory sphere, engaged and sometimes improvisational, that promotes liberation from established, official narratives and conventional action. The challenge is not limited to the students—it is also assumed by the teachers who must continually question and renew their own practice. In this space, learners develop a deeper understanding of their social environment, their histories, and themselves. They also learn to develop their social visions (Simon, 1992) and explore possible ways of acting upon and affecting the world around them.

Learning to Read Critically: Skills and Strategies

The problem-posing approach to education has been used as a way to help learners develop critical thinking skills. It has also been associated with a student-centered curriculum that promotes active, inquiry-based learning (Shor, 1992, Quintero & Rummel, 2003). Problem-posing also extends on Freire's idea of dialogical action by putting learners in a position of "critical co-investigators" who engage "in dialogue with the teacher" (Freire, 1970, p. 68) and with the material at hand (Naiditch, 2009).

The problem-posing approach to developing critical thinking skills starts with the identification of a problem that comes from students. It can be a personal, collective or social conflict that needs to be addressed. A teacher must be able to listen carefully to students in order to establish trust and to elicit the issues that the students bring to class. This model of listening represents one of the foundations of critical thinking skills. The problem-posing approach develops this and other skills, including:

- Identifying (students identify issues)
- Understanding (students develop a broad understanding of the issue they identified)
- Making meaningful relationships (students relate their issue to other issues and to the larger socio-economic and political contexts)
- Analyzing (students understand cause and effect, reasons and consequences, and make generalizations)

- Creating solutions (students come up with possible ways of addressing the issue at hand)

Auerbach (1992) has elaborated on five steps for learners to go through within the problem-posing approach. By following these steps, teachers will be guiding students towards the development of their critical thinking skills:

1. Describe the content

The content comes from what is referred to as a code. Codes originate from learners' experiences and reflect the problem being posed (Wallerstein, 1983). They are presented through any kind of media (written, oral, visual). The code, for example, can be a reading passage, a newspaper article, a photograph, a brochure of some kind, etc.

2. Define the problem

Defining the problem means uncovering the issue presented in the code, i.e., what students have identified as a problem that needs to be addressed.

3. Personalize the problem

It has been argued that unless students are able to personalize an issue and relate it to their lives, cultures, and experiences, the process will not make sense to them (Duckworth, 2006). An issue needs to be *theirs* to become meaningful and relevant.

4. Discuss the problem

Once the problem has been identified and personalized, students need to engage in a contextualized discussion. This implies analyzing all the different aspects of an issue: its socio-economic importance, political consequences, personal and collective values, how it affects the students individually and as a community.

5. Discuss alternatives to the problem

This step involves students' suggestions on how to deal with and resolve the problem being posed. Students need to create different ways of addressing the problem and weigh all the possible consequences of their various choices.

As can be seen from these steps, the development of critical thinking skills is associated to not only selecting a problem to be investigated but making it meaningful to one's context and larger community by relating to it on a personal (the individual student) and collective (the classroom, the school, the community or the larger society) level. Teachers act as facilitators of this process, and it is their job to guide the students through these steps with questions that engage students and make them consider an issue from different angles.

Freire's (2002) idea of *conscientização* (consciousness) embodies this educational tenet, which establishes that learners need to access and make use of their personal experiences so they become shared experiences and generate the content ("generative themes") to be dealt with as part of the class. All of these are considered skills that need to be developed as part of a critical pedagogical approach to education. As far as reading is concerned, these skills are essential in forming critical readers. To do so, teachers need to observe the following steps:

1. Understanding and defining reading:

In order to establish new relationships between reader and text, teachers need to develop new understandings of reading. One can only do that by first uncovering what students



understand by reading. Some of the responses I have received from students in class, for example, included: “we read to learn new things;” “authors are people with a lot of knowledge and teachers want us to read to learn about things;” “reading is very lonely;” “reading is boring;” “we have to read because we need to learn about the world.” How do we move from these ideas to the idea of reading as an active process, one that involves collaboration between text and reader? If the reader does not believe that he has an active role in the process, then reading classes are bound to become boring and meaningless, as some students describe them.

2. Problematising the relationship between text and reader:

Based on students’ understanding of what reading is and what it entails, and how it can be used to develop critical thinking, teachers can move on to the problematization of the relationship between text and reader. This process requires students to confront the views expressed in a text with their own views of the topic being presented. This is not an easy skill to develop, as any kind of problematization involves drawing critically upon one’s experiences and asserting one’s position. Students need to understand that a text is not always “right.” They need to be taught to argue with a text, to agree and disagree with an author, to confront what is being read. This requires the development of a skeptical attitude. In a critical reading class, it is essential that teachers encourage learners to question what they read by brainstorming possible ways of interpreting a text. The process of questioning an author’s voice can help students to find their own voices.

Passive readers are taught to always relate to a text to get or extract information. They are taught to look for the author’s meaning or the message that is being conveyed. Active readers, on the other hand, understand reading as a pluralistic activity; an activity which requires students to engage in an interaction with what they read with the purpose of generating meanings and ideas. Teachers also need to make sure they expose students to a variety of text genres, so students can get enough breadth and depth for their subsequent analysis.

In the end, students need to imagine themselves as “co-authors” of the texts they read and teachers need to develop classroom procedures that allow students to search for their voice in the texts they read. The classroom can only become a real place of knowledge production in the moment learners and teachers take ownership of the learning space and use it for reflection and research.

3. Becoming active readers by developing horizontal power relationships:

Transforming students into active readers implies elevating them to the level of co-writers of a text by empowering them to dialogue with a text. What this means is that learners are encouraged to develop a conversation with a text by identifying its perspective and contrasting it with their own. This is not an easy task, especially for learners who have been taught to believe that their contribution or knowledge is not valued in the classroom or that they read to get information only. This kind of vertical power relationship that we see in more traditional classroom settings does not encourage pluralism. The teacher represents the knowledge that needs to be gained and the texts are the vehicle through which this knowledge is transmitted.

Developing a critical perspective requires teachers to create an atmosphere of *horizontal learning patterns* (Naiditch, 2009) where everyone’s knowledge and backgrounds are recognized

and learners' contributions and perspectives are encouraged and valued as much as that of the teacher or the authors of a text. Students can only begin to develop critical thinking skills when they perceive the classroom as a space of horizontal power relationships where there is no one-knowledge that is more important or more valued. In fact, when teachers position themselves as equal members of the classroom community as opposed to authority figures, students will feel more at ease when sharing their personal histories. Critical thinking presupposes no asymmetrical power relationships between teachers and learners or between learners and text. Everyone is on equal status and everyone's experiences are valued and relevant. The teacher and the text are just two more voices that add to the multiplicity of perspectives in the classroom.

Developing horizontal power relationships for classroom instruction implies seeing everyone as both a teacher and a student, as both a reader and an author. It also implies understanding reading as a dialogue and classrooms as dialogic spaces for comprehension and action. This libertarian approach to education has the potential of helping maximize the classroom space and time by creating an emancipating perspective for developing teaching and learning.

Traditional approaches to the teaching of reading have focused on teaching learners the sub-skills involved in reading (Harmer, 2001). Those sub-skills were also used as reading strategies for learners to deconstruct a text into smaller parts, search for specific pieces of information, and, in doing so, reconstruct the larger meaning. Such sub-skills and strategies involved, for example, skimming and scanning. Students are taught how to skim through a text to find the main ideas (reading for gist) and how to scan it to find specific information, usually in the form of proper nouns, names, dates and numbers (Matthews, Spratt & Dangerfield, 1990). As reading strategies, skimming and scanning are useful tools that help students achieve that first layer of meaning, which is reading for information – what the text is about and the arguments presented. Further strategies need to be used for readers to interact with the text on a deeper level to uncover other layers of meanings.

In developing a more critical approach to the teaching of reading, teachers need to think of strategies that help learners move beyond the mere identification and description of the elements of a text. Learners do need to be able to identify the topic of a reading passage and describe the elements that were mentioned by its author. However, the focus of a critical reading class should be on strategies that require learners to extrapolate the meanings of a text by exercising skills, such as the following:

1. Creating meaningful relationships

The first step in developing critical thinking skills through reading is to ask learners to relate what they read to what they know about the topic. Many teachers use this approach as a pre-reading activity, as a way of arousing students' interest in reading a certain text, and creating a reason for learners to read. This skill can also be developed as a post-reading activity to help learners examine and question "previous" and "new" knowledge: what they knew about something and what new information they have gathered.



2. Comparing information

The process of comparison, by definition, requires that learners recognize at least two realities. By comparing two points of view, learners are challenged to confront “new” information with what they already knew (or thought) about a certain topic.

3. Interpreting the meaning of a text

When it comes to interpretation, it is extremely important for the teacher to recognize the value of different (but plausible) interpretations. Interpreting the meaning of a text requires that students contrast the reality described in the text to their own reality and context so they can make sense of what they read and create meaning. Interpretation also involves filtering what is read based on individual experiences and emotions. As part of a larger critical process of interpretation, it is essential for teachers to realize that students have different perspectives based on their own life experiences and their way of relating to the word and the world. Therefore, as long as learners are able to use the text to support their interpretation, teachers should allow for and expect open-ended possibilities.

4. Analyzing the text

Analysis of a text is a result of the interpretation process. Students are required to look at the text in terms of what it means for them culturally and socially. An analysis of a text may also require students to direct their attention to specific parts of the text and focus on the nature of a particular element or feature of the text. Analyzing a text involves being able to look into its nature and production conditions aiming at understanding its constituent elements.

5. Synthesizing

The process of synthesis refers to students’ ability to summarize what was read and to create possible generalizations. If interpretation and analysis require breaking up the larger text into small components to understand the whole picture, the process of synthesis represents the opposite. Students need to be able to elaborate their conclusions and this requires that they combine (or better, re-combine) and (re)arrange the different elements of a text to get to a conclusion. In a way, synthesizing is a process of reconstructing meaning – personal (what the text means to individual students) and collective (what the text means to the group) meanings. The process of synthesis can also be understood as reconciliation, as students need to take all the perspectives presented in class into account and formulate their own perspective.

6. Assessing

The assessment of a text is perhaps one of the most difficult skills learners need to develop. This is because assessment requires the development of personal values and judgment. Assessment involves establishing both your personal set of values in relation to what was read and the criteria used to judge the esthetic and content value of a text. Critical assessment does not mean what some traditional approaches to reading suggest (“Did you like this text?”); it goes further into selecting appropriate criteria for the appreciation of the social value of a text. The concern with assessment within the framework of critical pedagogy should be on how the text contributes to our understanding of the human condition. A critical assessment also allows learners to develop an appreciation of the elements of nature and humankind present in a text.

7. Developing social action

From a critical perspective, assessment should also be translated into some kind of social action (Freire, 2006). Students need to develop their understanding of the human condition taking its socio-economic elements into account. This involves developing a broad understanding of power and oppression in society and how students can act on the world around them by contemplating transformation – of society and of themselves. Within a critical pedagogical approach to reading, developing social action is a way of responding to the reading by making use of Freire's (2001) tenet of using the word to transform the world. In the Freirean praxis, reflection translates into action, and this is what happens in the process of developing critical literacy – you appropriate yourself of the word and the world.

Some of these steps are complementary and developed almost simultaneously. Many reading specialists, in fact, argue that steps 1, 2, 3, and 4 overlap, because in order to create relationships one needs to compare and contrast information and the interpretation of a text requires an ability to analyze it (Rosenblatt, 1994). Steps 6 and 7 are the ones that may require special attention from the teachers' point of view. From a critical perspective, assessing a text and students' reading comprehension needs to take into account what students take with them from the reading activity and how reading affects their lives. This is why assessment should be related to social action, a stage that gives students an opportunity to display not only the knowledge gained, but their ability to transform that knowledge into productive action for the betterment of society. Reading that results in social action leads to transformation, and this is the ultimate aim of learning to read the world.

Learning to Read Critically: An example

In order for the reader to understand how all these skills and strategies actually translate into a critical pedagogical practice, in this section I provide an example of classroom procedures using the elements that were described in this article, i.e., how to use critical pedagogy in the teaching of reading for social action.

The example that follows illustrates the steps taken in one of my classes. The identification of the theme came as a result of a school event. It all started when one of the high school students made it public that he was going to bring his boyfriend to the graduation prom and that he expected to be treated like anyone else – without being judged based on his sexual orientation and without being made fun of. He also expected the school to guarantee that he and his partner were going to be safe and respected like all the other students.

The students in my class decided that this was an issue they wanted to study and discuss further. For many of them, talking about sexual orientation was a new experience and having someone in the school come out and be so open about his relationship with another male student was a situation that needed to be processed and elaborated. Moreover, given the environment of homophobia and all the jokes and threats that followed the episode, students realized the need to learn more about a topic many of them condemned without being able to understand.

In their journals, students were able to write about their doubts, fears, questions, and share stories that involved other gay people they knew – family members, people in the community, celebrities, and even other students at school. Admitting to being gay or questioning



your sexual orientation was not an easy task for high school students in a predominantly immigrant Spanish-speaking area, so when students expressed an interest in learning more about it, we decided to develop a whole unit on the topic, and the unit involved reading for social action.

After analyzing and selecting a number of resources that were age-appropriate and adequate for classroom use, we decided that we were all going to read a book called *Reflections of a Rock Lobster: A Story about Growing Up Gay* written by Aaron Fricke (2000). The description of the theme came not only from the book students read, but from a variety of resources, including their journals (for those students who wanted to share them), newspapers and magazines, television shows, their own experiences and from different members of the school and the community. It was important to have students exposed to a variety of resources, as this promotes multiple views and presents different perspectives on the topic. This is a useful aspect of classroom procedure that helps students to develop an informed opinion on the issue at hand, particularly in terms of a critical approach. In this case, students read about and studied the emotional, psychological, and social processes a teenager goes through in search of his or her sexual identity.

The stage of discrimination with this particular topic was extremely relevant for these students, as it involved sorting through and learning to discriminate fact and fiction, reality from opinion. Students developed a “fact and fiction checklist” based on all the pieces of information they had gathered. This checklist helped them to develop their points of view based on evidence from the texts they had read and from other sources they deemed reliable. Understanding the value of different sources of information and comparing them forces students to make decisions as to which sources they can trust and why. This process also included a discussion on objective and subjective perspectives with students learning how to distinguish concrete facts from opinions disguised as facts using linguistic devices and stylistic resources as clues used by a writer to develop his or her point of view.

After students had gathered, selected, compared and contrasted information on sexuality and sexual orientation, it became much easier for them to develop an analysis of Aaron Fricke’s book. The interpretation students developed was contextually based, as they transferred the context and situation described in the book to their own context of the classroom and school setting. As they discussed the issues raised by a gay teen who needs to confront himself and the school at the same time he deals with societal pressures, students realized how much of our personal feelings and perceptions are filtered through the act of reading and how much meaning we actually bring to what we read. Without even noticing, the research students had done, their checklists, their search for facts and accurate information, interviews, and discussions had transformed them into active readers. While writing in their journals, many of them shared with me and their classmates, how much they had “talked back to the book and to Aaron;” how much they could “relate to the characters in the book;” and, how the process had made them reconsider the situation they were experiencing at their own school where a teenage student was coming out and asking for school support and understanding.

The process of synthesizing what they had read did not come easy, as many students realized they had conflicting thoughts and feelings whereas some others needed more time to

process all they had been exposed to. This is a natural reaction, particularly when the topic is both personal and still taboo for many of these teenagers who are still developing their identities. This is why the next steps, assessment and social action, are extremely important and necessary not only for practicing active reading, but for preparing informed students to become citizens for democracy and social justice.

A number of suggestions were given as possible courses of action for students to engage in. As a teacher, my role was to guide and encourage them to weigh all the pros and cons of their possible actions and help them develop their projects once a decision was made as to how to transform their findings into social action. Furthermore, it was also decided that we would pursue different courses of action, thus allowing students to engage in multiple activities at the same time and to assess the value and effect of each one. Below are some of the social actions in which students engaged:

- Students contacted the local chapter of GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network) to get information and materials in order to transform their school into a safe school.
- Students collected and distributed educational resources about sexual orientation around the school and the community.
- Students collected money and donations to buy more books about gay themes for the school library (which had no books on the topic before this project).
- Students contacted a number of people who could volunteer their time as guest speakers and come to the school to talk about their coming-out experiences and about the importance of tolerance and respect to sexual diversity.
- A group of students developed and acted out a play based on certain scenes from Fricke's book to perform at school.
- Some students created posters to hang around the school focusing on the idea of a safe school.
- Some students initiated the process to officially start a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) student club in the school. They believed that by having both gay and straight students together, it would be easier to recruit members.

As can be seen from these examples, social action means translating what you have read into some kind of work that will benefit the larger community and that will demonstrate your understanding of what you have read (which is part of the assessment process). The actions students engaged in as part of this project also reflected their talents and strengths. Each student contributed based on his skills and they were all equally valued and important: students who were more artistically oriented engaged in creating posters or acting; students who enjoyed communications contacted agencies and speakers, while others worked on creating text or visiting local places around the community.

This critical approach to translating reading into social action also makes students understand the importance of reading for their personal growth and for the development of their cognitive and social skills and maturity level. When students realize their role in promoting change, they feel empowered. They understand that their contribution and participation can in fact have an effect in the world around them and this motivates them to want to read even more.



From the teacher's point of view, reading for social action also promotes inquiry-based learning that is truly student-centered. Students need to learn to take responsibility for their learning and a critical approach to teaching encourages student-led activities that are based on students' needs and interests. At the same time, it also gives students a sense of purpose while building their self-esteem and independence.

Conclusion

Reading in the classroom should be a fun and motivating activity that engages students at the same time that it promotes the development of critical thinking skills. While reading, students learn to question and to search for answers. They also learn that there are different ways of interpreting a text and that these reflect the different ways of interpreting the world and to relate to life situations and circumstances. When selecting texts for students, teachers should pay close attention to the problems students bring up in class and to the topics they express an interest in. This way, reading will be relevant to the classroom context and meaningful to the students' lives. Readings should reflect students' experiences, but it should also expose them to new experiences, broaden their horizons and widen their perspectives.

One of the greatest concerns for teachers is what to do with the texts selected and how to go about developing classroom activities that will effectively result in learners' development of reading, social, and critical thinking skills. The approach described in this article aimed at addressing this issue and was developed based on critical pedagogical principles that establish that in order to develop critical thinking skills and become socially engaged citizens, students need to relate to the texts they read on a deep and personal level, and that this is only achieved when students take an active role in the reading process.

The first thing to bear in mind is that the learner of the 21st century is as much a reader as he is a *co-writer* who contributes meaning to what is read by bringing in his or her own experiences, previous readings and views of the world. Reading is not a one-way street and readers contribute meaning as much as they get meaning from a written text. Teachers who ask students to find the moral of a story or the meaning behind an author's words express a misunderstanding of what reading entails. Reading should be an open door of possibilities and classroom activities should enable students to search for multiple interpretations. By encouraging students to dialogue with a text, teachers will be helping them to find their own voices and to develop a critical view of different topics and issues.

As a matter of fact, the reading skills and strategies described in this article can be readily transferred to any kind of learning. Additionally, this critical approach also encourages teachers to work collaboratively across disciplines. In developing the unit about *Reflections of a Rock Lobster*, for example, I worked closely with teachers from other content areas, such as health and physical education, biology, and social studies. This integration helps students create connections and analyze a topic from different disciplinary points of view. Apart from that, this interdisciplinary approach helps students distinguish between fact and opinion and identify different text genres. This way, learners can activate specific knowledge every time they read a new text since they can predict the kind of language they will encounter and the kind of vocabulary and syntactic structures (e.g. an academic text uses more passive voice) they will find.

Over the years I have developed this approach, I have witnessed how students' perceptions about reading have changed. They learn that reading is a dynamic process that is always being reconstructed because we are never the same. As context and time change, so do our views and ways of interpreting and relating to the world. This is a result of the way we process and internalize our experiences. We are always constructing and reconstructing meaning every time we interact with a text. Above all, I have learned that texts need to speak to the students and that developing social action is a way for students to speak back to the texts.

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*The Future of Education:
Reimagining Our Schools from the Ground Up*
By Kieran Egan.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. ix; 190 pp. \$20.00

Reviewed by Steven P. Jones, Missouri State University

People reading this review of Kieran Egan's book *The Future of Education: Reimagining Our Schools from the Ground Up* will be old enough and experienced enough with the ways of American public schooling to have some opinion about the state of our schools—about the problems they face and what they do well or poorly. At the end of Egan's provocative book, by way of a history of education he imagines being written about public schools in the first half of the 21st century, Egan offers the following general description of schooling from the mid-nineteenth century until now. Do you think this description rings true?

...and the massive enterprise of schooling from mid-nineteenth to the early twenty-first century seems now just another of history's cruel jokes on our human forebears. All that boredom and pain, that half-learned and barely understood knowledge, which engaged the imaginations of the tiniest minority of people, the ill-directed energy of teachers, and the resentment of so many students. After more than a decade of their lives spent in these schools, most students could recall pitifully little of what they had been taught and had read; they knew by heart nothing more than the clichéd words of some pop song. The wonder of the world around them, the passion of their history, the possibilities of human experience were things of which they glimpsed only the most fleeting sense. After they left school most students never read anything but mental pabulum again. Schooling during this time seems to have been a massive and clumsy industry poorly designed to carry the experience of life and the accumulation of technological skills across the generations. (p. 180)

An unfavorable picture of our schools, to say the least, and one we might prefer to reject. But even the greatest enthusiasts of the public schools might, in a pensive moment, fear that much of what Egan describes is too often true of the public schools. If Egan is even a little bit right in how he sees schools (and I think he is much more than a little right), then we have a problem to diagnose and solve.

This is where Egan's *The Future of Education* becomes a provocative book—because he does not diagnose and solve the problems of teaching and learning in schools in the usual ways. One set of diagnoses and solutions we're used to hearing (because we offer them ourselves) comes from what Egan calls "traditionalists;" another set comes from "progressivists." Progressivists might agree with Egan's description of schooling, above, though only nervously. Like Egan, progressivists see school as dreary, full of students bored by useless, lifeless, and disconnected tasks. The complaint often made by progressivists is that we have ignored what we

have known at least since Rousseau—that children have a good and vibrant and trustworthy nature, and that following the dictates of that nature through its development is the way to success for the educator. The intellectual debt of progressivism extends from Rousseau through Piaget and Dewey, who argued that “Education, therefore, must begin with a psychological insight into the child’s capacities, interests, and habits” (quoted in Egan, p. 85). Progressivists maintain that schools, especially when they are test-driven, do not allow freedom or time enough for students to explore and learn in their own ways (p. 91). They argue for more child-centered programs and more attention to research that exposes the nature of the child’s development (p. 135). Knowledge as an isolated bit of cultural history is inert, progressivists maintain. Instead of insisting students acquire a limited and superficial collection of knowledge bits, the argument goes, teachers should help students focus on *how* to learn. Teaching and learning in schools should shift toward procedures—toward how to do things, how to find information, and learning how to learn (p. 150). Teacher educators—most of whom are evangelists in the progressivist cause—are eager to baptize their new teacher education students into the overlapping tenets of their faith: differentiated teaching, multiple intelligence theory, teaching in accord with students’ differing learning styles, and constructivism. The school and its curriculum are to be made more relevant to students’ actual lives and should respond to the problems people face in the real world.

Where progressivists get nervous in Egan’s description of school is precisely where traditionalists take heart in it. “Yes!” the traditionalist is likely to exclaim: barely understood knowledge, students having no memory of what they have learned, a taste for pop songs and mental pabulum, and no experience of the intellectual glories offered by one’s culture—these are precisely the awful failures of our public schools. But the traditionalist’s solution to these problems is not a return to the dictates of the child’s nature and the practices of the progressivists. In most traditionalist accounts these progressivist ideas and practices are the cause of the problem. The traditionalist sees the task of the public school primarily in intellectual terms—as an opportunity to make the best education and cultural life available to all children (p. 113). Important always is the curriculum that consists of canonical works, important cultural knowledge, art forms, and so on. Traditionalists argue that the basic building block of the educated mind is formed by familiarity with particular kinds of knowledge (pp. 85, 142, & 143). What is needed, now, in the public schools is not a retreat from important curriculum in the face of recalcitrant students (and teachers) who prefer Lady Gaga to Faulkner, but a renewed cultural battle to hold to standards and justify a rigorous curriculum (p. 113).

In his portrayal of the traditionalist argument Egan does not make the distinction that is often helpful in exploring educational ideas commonly seen as “traditional”—the distinction between the “perennialist” who sees value in a curriculum that emphasizes canonical works that explore enduring human questions and our pursuit of knowledge and certainty, and the “essentialist” whose educational ends are more prosaic, having to do with the acquisition of basic knowledge and skills necessary to effective civic and economic life. The essentialist position is the one that has, for a long time, influenced the agenda and focused complaint about the public schools: the schools are supposed to give students the knowledge and skills essential to economic productivity and civic life, and they are not doing this very well. High-stakes educational testing is designed to enforce that agenda—an agenda also enforced by our decade-long tumultuous romance with No Child Left Behind, and now Obama’s Race to the Top with its emphasis on



preparation for college and career. Egan is right to point out that this aspect of the “traditionalist” program muddles intellectual ends and socializing ends of education. For an essentialist, knowledge and the acquisition of intellectual skills and abilities are but means to an end—a means to properly socialize the young into social and economic roles most needed by the governing society.

The “history of education” Egan fabricates in *The Future of Education*, from 2010—2050, reveals the tenacity with which progressivists and traditionalists have attacked, and are likely to continue to attack, one another in the battle over the public schools. More than that, however, the history provides Egan with a way to expose the failures of these two ideas as he proposes his own idea—a third way to conceive of the purposes and practices of the public schools (p. 143). By 2050, in Egan’s educational history, neither the progressivist nor the traditionalist agendas have won the hearts and minds of educators, politicians, and citizens—Egan’s own ideas, the ideas of Imaginative Education (IE), have won them. Readers of Egan’s previous books—especially *The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) and *An Imaginative Approach to Teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2005) might be able to predict how and why IE prevails in this history. It prevails because it is decisively different than the other two, even as it has some “residual sympathies” with both progressivism and traditionalism (p. 137). And it prevails because it succeeds in doing what the other two ideas cannot—it revitalizes and reinvigorates the act of knowing for the learner, connecting the learner to sources of wonder and imagination dead to the essentialist-leaning traditionalist and unavailable to the progressivist.

We begin to understand Egan’s third way by means of one “residual sympathy” with progressivism—the need for a language of “stages of development.” One cannot deny that the adult can know and do things that a child simply cannot, and in recounting those differences it is natural to speak in terms of “stages” of development. But it matters a great deal how we conceive these stages, and Egan would *not* have us think of stages of development like Piaget-inspired progressivists tend to do. In Egan’s conception—following the thinking of Leo Vygotsky and, before him, Herbert Spencer—there are “regularities in human mental development, but they are so tied up with our social experience, our culture, and the kinds of intellectual tools we pick up that we can’t tell whether the regularities are due to our nature, to our society, to our culture, to our intellectual tools, or what” (p. 26). For Egan, stages are more accurately described as kinds of understanding acquired by an increasingly complex way that we learn to use language. With each kind of understanding comes a different set of “cognitive tools” we use to think about and understand the world.

Here is a question that might reveal Egan’s idea: Does a new-born baby have the same cognitive tools to think with as does Stephen Hawking? If we agree the baby is absent some of the tools Hawking can think with, then how shall we name the difference, and where do those tools come from? What “stages” does the baby go through? Egan finds five different ways of understanding ideally accomplished in a certain order—the somatic, the mythic, the romantic, the philosophic, and the ironic. Somatic tools are those basic tools given us by the body, especially the five senses. These are the tools the baby “thinks with” in seeking to find what he or she needs most. Mythic tools come with the acquisition of oral language, and romantic tools come with the acquisition of literacy. Philosophic tools come later—and to some they come

partially, if at all. These are the tools by which we are able to create abstract theories about things. Ironic understanding comes to still fewer and involves, among other things, a kind of intellectual playfulness—a sense of the great game of ideas and the delights this game can yield (p. 83).

Stephen Hawking has acquired all these cognitive tools, not simply from within himself, as it were, but precisely as Egan has suggested—as a gift Hawking’s society and culture had potentially to give him, and as he earned in his interactions and encounters with that society and culture. It is no accident that these “stages” come in some sort of order—body first, then oral language, then literacy, then abstract thinking, then intellectual playfulness. It is no accident that culture itself progressed through these stages: In the west, Homer’s oral epics came before Herodotus’ romantic histories, and Herodotus’ histories came before Thucydides’ interpretive history or Plato’s full-blown philosophical inquiries. One could not come before the other, though each might have been anticipated before it was achieved. This will be true for our new baby, too, as he or she uses the cognitive tools given him or her to come to understand his or her world. Each learner, as it turns out, has to “recapitulate” the cognitive advances of the culture in which he or she lives if he or she is to be fully educated.

We do not discard the somatic way of understanding when we achieve oral language, or discard the mythic way of understanding when we achieve literacy—and so on with the rest. As we enter each way of understanding the world we are provided with what Egan calls a different set “cognitive tools” for us to think with. When we begin to acquire oral language (mythic stage), for instance, we acquire the cognitive tool of the story that we didn’t have before, and we begin to try to organize or categorize the world according to binary opposites we learn about—hot and cold, good and evil, fear and security. We learn how language works and begin to have the tool of metaphor at our disposal. We appreciate and learn to tell jokes—something we couldn’t do before. When we begin to read (romantic stage), we are able to shape a greater sense of what is “really real,” and we have access to a heightened sense of wonder and curiosity about the world. We become interested in extremes and become avid collectors of things. Cognitive tools at the philosophic stage include a sense of abstract reality, a grasp of general ideas and their anomalies, a sense of agency (a need to play a social role), the search for authority and truth, and more.

Neither the progressivist nor the traditionalist takes full advantage of and attempts to develop these cognitive tools in the ways they should, according to Egan. That’s because advocates of the two camps miss the point—the one in favor of “development” and with a healthy distrust of “knowledge,” the other in favor of “knowledge” and with a faith that only acquired knowledge breeds cognitive “development.” Neither camp has paid much attention to the “cognitive tools” learners, though interaction with their society and culture, come “naturally” to have.

The object of education, Egan maintains, is to master cognitive tools (p. 142). What Egan hopes the schools can learn to do, as the decades of the 21st century begin to unwind and the history of public schools is truly written, is to learn to exercise those cognitive tools in the service of the five ways of understanding. Egan hopes the schools will “just say no” to anyone—progressivist, traditionalist, or anyone else—who tries to see the school “as appropriately



involved in activities other than stimulating, elaborating, and developing the cognitive tools and kinds of understanding of students” (p. 173).

Egan’s 1997 book, *The Educated Mind*, offers a more detailed theoretical underpinning of Egan’s ideas about recapitulation theory and the nature of cognitive tools than does this new book, and his *An Imaginative Approach to Teaching* (2005) offers more practical examples of how these ideas look in classrooms. But there is theory enough in *The Future of Education* to connect Egan’s ideas to existing conversations about teaching and learning, and there are practical examples enough to show how this might work and why we should take his ideas seriously.

I do not think Egan, in writing this book, was really much interested in predicting the future of education in the 21st century, even when that imagined history enabled him to outline how IE would become the transcendent educational idea for the public schools. The history, I think, is a rhetorical ploy aimed right at the reader—the reader who might be a progressivist, or the reader who might be a traditionalist—at any rate, the reader who is no doubt married to his long-held, precious ideological position. The book is less about how IE will win the ideological battle in the public arena in the next 40 years than a challenge for us, now, to reconsider our own private understandings. Is it time for me to challenge my own traditionalist (perennialist) preconceptions? Is it time for you to reconsider your preconceptions? Are either of us so sure we’re right in the face of the failures we now see in the public schools—the kinds of failures mentioned in the opening passage of this review? Are there better ways to restore wonder and imagination in the minds, hearts, and souls of the students we’re teaching?

Egan’s book suggests how and why we ought to reconsider our ideas. Progressivism fails, just as does traditionalism, because neither captures the wonderful drama that happens when students take on knowledge (the comfortable home of the traditionalist) with the appropriate cognitive tools the student’s nature and culture (a developmental-like idea comfortable enough for the progressivist) give him or her to use. Egan repeats in *The Future of Education* what I think is his favorite passage from his earlier book (2005) on imaginative teaching. This passage captures the intellectual vitality he believes we can create (and recreate) in teaching and learning when we, traditionalists, stop seeing “knowledge” as mere background for social productivity and we, progressivists, decide to forego the moral high-ground we gain by defending the nature of the child at the cost of cultural knowledge. Knowledge doesn’t have to be deadly and it doesn’t have to be contrary to the nature of the child. Egan’s third way promises a more sure grasp of knowledge attained with real pleasure when the imagination of the learner is allowed a full play in his or her use of cognitive tools. Egan’s “signature” passage, then:

All knowledge is human knowledge and all knowledge is a product of human hopes, fears, and passions. To bring knowledge to life in students’ minds we must introduce it to students in the context of the human hopes, fears, and passions in which it finds its fullest meaning. The best tool for doing this is the imagination. (2005, p. xii, xiii)

Both the progressivist and traditionalist might find rest if Egan is right about this. But first we’ll have to lay aside our war-making arguments for awhile and do some reading and thinking.



*The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How
Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*
by Diane Ravitch

New York: Basic Books, 2010. x; 271 pp. \$17.00

Reviewed by Jessica A. Heybach, Aurora University/Northern Illinois University

When I first heard that Diane Ravitch had “changed her mind” about current education reform embodied in No Child Left Behind (NCLB), I was both shocked and intrigued. How could this have happened? What, exactly, prompted such a radical paradigm shift? For nearly a decade Ravitch has sung the praises of accountability and standards, while assuring Americans that market-driven management and incentives would effectively reform our deteriorating education system. In her estimation, the system was broken by leftist-inspired reforms that watered-down content in favor of relevance as well as by constructivist notions of knowledge and pedagogy. Also frustrated by the lack of “excellence” and “rigor,” and the loss of a romanticized past of social unity, Ravitch quickly became a leading voice for the conservative movement in education. The gap between liberal and conservative educational reformers regarding the status of NCLB, of course, couldn’t get much wider. For this reason, Ravitch’s change of heart invites further investigation. Although many on the left feel vindicated by her recent admissions, others are suspicious of the tardiness of her decision. Regardless of one’s attitude toward Ravitch and her body of work, there is much to be learned through this text about today’s conflicted educational landscape.

The first story offered in her book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education* is one of upper middle class privilege and sentimentality. Ravitch recounts being forced to finally repaint her Brooklyn office, and in the packing and unpacking of a life’s work she rediscovered what she began her career thinking about concerning schools and communities. Although Ravitch is a trained historian and scholar, she somehow forgot or failed to trust what history has always delivered—insight into the present. One might read her intellectual rehabilitation moment cynically as a calculated ploy to sell books; or one might view it as an incredible act of courage. As I read the book, I experienced both of these emotions.

Ravitch (2010) is direct throughout and states clearly where she currently stands, “The short answer is that my views changed as I saw how these ideas were working out in reality” (p.2). She continues her confessional by explaining,

I too had fallen for the latest panaceas and miracle cures; I too had drunk deeply of the elixir that promised a quick fix to intractable problems. I too had jumped aboard a bandwagon, one festooned with banners celebrating the power of accountability, incentives, and markets. I too was captivated by these ideas. (p.3)



“Quick fixes,” “miracle cures,” and “bandwagon” mentality—nothing sounds more American, and as Americans these themes resonate. I understand that these ideas appeal to average citizens who lack a complex understanding of the American education system. Most citizens fail to recognize the socio-political forces that influence schools, and do not readily associate schools as deeply political institutions, nor do they recognize the intellectual intensity demanded of its teachers. But, how did a woman who earned a PhD in *history* from Columbia University, who was mentored by Lawrence Cremin, and whose first published article was entitled “Programs, Placebos, Panaceas” (1968), fall prey to such empty jargon, and hopelessly unattainable goals as those outlined in NCLB?

Ravitch’s questioning of NCLB became public through a series of articles, one of which was in *Education Week* entitled, “Time to Kill ‘No Child Left Behind,’” where she summarizes concisely many of the ideas that would soon appear in her latest book. Contending that NCLB has failed to deliver the intended results, she hopes that the Obama administration will forgo tinkering with the law, but rather create a new vision of education that returns to the basic tenets of building a participatory democracy through public schooling. Throughout Ravitch’s new book she longs for the days of sound neighborhood public schools that taught students to be democratic citizens committed to a common set of values with communities and families at the center. She concisely and rather successfully unravels the defining aspects of today’s education climate with an analysis of all the usual suspects: the testing cult, institutional lying to bolster the creation of “reformed” districts (District 2 in New York City and San Diego), the business model applied to education (the shift from Superintendents to CEOs), accountability, teacher tenure, the dismissal of ineffective teachers, school choice (now the charter school movement), and what she calls “philanthrocapitalism” (p.199) which represents the new venture philanthropy of organizations such as the Gates Foundations. However, nothing in her discussion is original or novel. Instead, it echoes the resounding body of critical scholarship that has been generated as a response to NCLB. Many eloquent critics of NCLB have voiced their opposition, rallied, and protested in the last decade, but few were heard by those in Washington think-tanks and positions of legislative power. So while it is difficult not to admire aspects of Ravitch’s book, many passages were met with a resounding “duh!” as I read her book.

Her narrative reads like a great mystery novel full of twists and turns and back ally deals with shady organizations. However, Ravitch only begins to get at the real issue that lies at the heart of her text—the relationship between democracy and schools. What does it mean to have democratic institutions within a pluralistic society as diverse as America? What is the role of education within American society to bring about democracy? Horace Mann (1848), one of the chief architects of the American public school system, offered this as the purpose of American education:

Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of the conditions of men,—the balance wheel of the social machinery. I do not here mean that it so elevates the moral nature as to make men disdain and abhor the oppression of their fellow men. This idea pertains to another of its attributes. But I mean that it gives each man the independence and the means by which he can resist the selfishness of other men. It does better than to disarm the poor of their hostility toward the rich: it prevents being poor. (para.6)

Phrases such as the “great equalizer,” have been a central legitimizing myth of American educational system. Yet, historical reality does not prove this to be unambiguously true, especially given the rates of poverty among children in this nation, and the perpetual “savage inequalities” that exist in public school funding. Ravitch would argue that education has been a “great equalizer,” one so powerful that it has prevented a great many waves of immigrant populations from remaining in poverty, and helped them to assimilate and prosper within the nation. Ravitch recounts her early inability to understand leftist historians’ rewriting of public school history as oppressive as they argued against the “widespread myth about the benevolent purposes and democratic accomplishments of public education” (p.5). She acknowledges that “this point of view was so contrary to my own understanding of the liberating role of public education” (p.5). This is a fundamental difference between Ravitch and her detractors—the metanarrative of American educational history.

This difference can also be found in the subtle way she mythologizes her beloved high school English teacher Mrs. Ratliff. Ravitch extols the virtues of “proper English,” “exacting standards,” and “accuracy,” while claiming Mrs. Ratliff did “nothing for our self-esteem.” Yet, Mrs. Ratliff somehow accomplished this feat without multiple choice tests, or the reading of banal textbooks, but through poetry and stories of distant times (Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ozymandias” is remembered by Ravitch) that earned Mrs. Ratliff the respect of the students (p.170). Rarely does a teacher earn the respect and adoration of her students without reaching them where they are and pulling them toward something new. I suspect that Ravitch remembers Mrs. Ratliff because she showed her what she might be, what she could be, and confirmed for her what every young person should feel—recognition and self worth. Mrs. Ratliff did what all great teachers do; they convince students that they can actually do what they thought impossible, that their ideas matter, and that they have value as human beings. This is seen in the graduation gifts of poetry Mrs. Ratliff personalized and gave publically to each student. Ravitch received “to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield,” and “among them, but not of them” (p.170). This example speaks to the undeniable fact that the life of a classroom is an aesthetic experience, an emotional experience, that helps form our perceptive faculties of both self and others. Thus, the art of teaching must be recovered if we are going to reach students the way Mrs. Ratliff reached Diane Ravitch.

It is often said in teacher education classes that students long remember *how they felt* in a classroom rather than *what they learned*. Unfortunately, the consequences of NCLB have all too often created an aesthetic and/or emotional nightmare for many students. How many stories of third graders crying on testing day have to be told? How many kindergarteners have learned how to sit still and bubble in circles to “prepare” for the coming tests? How many mission statements exist that speak of children as products and commodities of a global marketplace? NCLB has had the obvious academic consequences by privileging only reading and math, and by devaluing civic education, science, and the humanities. Yet, the legislation has had a powerful influence on students’ identity formation as well, and in this sense can be seen as a form of emotional and aesthetic abuse, particularly among our most vulnerable populations. What is missing from Ravitch’s confessional, then, is a substantive discussion about these destructive consequences and a frank admission that real harm, at the deepest levels, was done to a generation of American school children.



Ravitch ends her book with a plea to rescind the current state of educational affairs, reject market driven principles, and return schools to their rightful place at the center of creating a democratic public. She argues,

Business leaders like the idea of turning the school into a marketplace where the consumer is king. But the problem with the marketplace is that it dissolves communities and replaces them with consumers. *Going to school is not the same as going shopping...*the market serves us well when we want to buy a pair of shoes or a new car or a can of paint; we can shop around for the best value or the style we like. The market is not the best way to deliver public services...privatizing our public schools makes as much sense as privatizing the fire department or the police department. It is possible, but it is not wise. (p.221) (my emphasis)

Although much of what Ravitch articulates in this book is not “new” to those who spend their days with children, or academics engaged in the education discipline, she should be cheered for publically changing her mind. Ravitch reminds us, “Doubt and skepticism are signs of rationality...it is doubt that shows we are still thinking, still willing to reexamine hardened beliefs when confronted with new facts and new evidence” (p.2). This book embodies, as an act, that which has been most democratic about the American tradition, our ability to speak freely, reach across differences in dialogue, revise deeply held ideas, and dissent without fear of reprisals. The question now arises, will the Obama administration listen to this cautionary tale, or will they continue to be wooed by those with deep pockets and shallow understandings?

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