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***How to Increase In-Class Learning by
Balancing Awareness, Knowledge, and Power***

NOTE: This is not assigned reading, nor directly about the workshop topic, it's some thoughts and sources you might find relevant about why our education system has been getting such poor (and perhaps worsening) results for so long—and how we might reverse this dangerous situation.

Feedback on this text, and the workshop, too, is always appreciated.

Myths and the Romance—and Catastrophe—of Education

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We are confronted by the overwhelming yet contradictory reality of a “world system” in crisis five thousand years after its inception, which has globalized its reach to the most distant corner of the planet at the same time that it has paradoxically excluded a majority of humanity. This is a matter of life and death. The human life invoked here is not a theoretical concept, an idea, or an abstract horizon, but rather a mode of reality of each concrete human being who is also the absolute prerequisite and ultimate demand of all forms of liberation. . . . in the face of the collective murder and suicide that humanity is headed for if it does not change the direction of its irrational behavior. (Enrique Dussel. *Ethics of Liberation: In the Age of Globalization and Exclusion*. 2013, p. xv)

The culture of schooling abounds in myths—many are pitfalls for teachers, parents, and citizens. Some education myths are romantic notions of lovely outcomes that mask the disappointing outcomes of the bulk of schooling. Still, these romantic myths can inspire, motivate, and point to important truths. Other education

myths are dystopian and can confuse, deceive, depress, or enrage. Each can contain some truth and some falsehood.

Can education professionals put myths in perspective and focus on promoting learning in our schools?

The problem is that myths often incorporate unwarranted beliefs, prejudices, and stereotypes, but they can also contain wisdom. Understanding individuals and their circumstances is the only basis for effective teaching, yet education myths tend to draw attention away from our learners, ourselves, and our day-to-day circumstances. Dystopian myths, like: “schools are heartless assembly lines,” do harm by leading their believers to cynicism and destructive acts (or to abandon the profession). Uncritical belief in myths blocks consideration of alternatives to traditional schooling and cements harmful practices by encouraging an attitude of “ain’t nothing we can do about it.”

Yet abandoning belief in myths is difficult, because it demands critical analysis and honest data. Myths are everywhere and underlie many cultural practices beyond schooling, like advertising, folklore, history, psychology, science, and other kinds of storytelling. Neither positive nor negative myths are completely true and so can be damaging—in education and elsewhere—if they are unreflectively accepted.

Abandoning uncritical belief is a cornerstone of maturity that permits consideration of multiple possibilities and fully informed choices. There is every reason for educators to adopt and teach freedom from belief in myths, demoting

them to what they are, imaginative possibilities with no inherent truth value—even if we learned them from our beloved grandmother.

The following are some examples of education myths, positive and negative:

1. Positive: Teaching Changes and Sometimes Saves Lives. Teaching is like sowing seeds: one never knows which will germinate, or when. Teachers can inspire, charm, motivate, and awaken through many means: students learn that such people exist, and may try to become one themselves. But we tend to forget the rarity of these priceless experiences, together with the painful grind of years in the passive, anesthetized role that is normal for school inmates, pre-K to post-doc.

Stingy with small privileges, schools withhold them along stubborn lines of abledness, class, ethnicity, gender, race, religion, and sexuality. Withholding trivial privileges impoverishes even the privileged with low expectations in a “war of all against all,” as Thomas Hobbes called it.

The world would be radically different if time in school were devoted to humanizing learning activity, rather than the dehumanizing, painful trudge through years of deadening *a-priori* curricula, least-common-denominator methodologies, and punitive testing. Caleb Gattegno expressed this key idea in a nutshell:

[Compare] the way of working that is from the teacher to the student—the traditional method of schooling—and the way of working that is from the student to the world—the method of subordinating teaching to learning (1970, p. 17).

We should not forget that at times teachers literally save lives when they assume roles beyond their teaching duties and support a student, young or old, in unfortunate circumstances. Saving lives—literally and metaphorically—is a

necessary outcome of successful learning, which requires fighting the many dehumanizing forces we face in today's societies (advertising and consumerism; environmental degradation; gender and race prejudice; mindless "entertainment" and "sports;" peer pressure; war, crime, and other forms of social violence; wasteful industrialism; etc.)

2. Negative: Following Instructions Leads to Learning. The idea that teaching is a teacher-to-student transmission of knowledge (the teacher's job is to fill empty student heads with knowledge) is akin to the idea that we can learn underlying principles by following instructions: both are educationally dysfunctional. I don't mean that instruction is completely ineffective; of course some learning can take place this way, that's a large part of what happens in our schools. But having learners follow instructions can give a short-lived appearance of learning (on a good day, lasting till exam time . . .).

The myth of learning by following instructions is reinforced by those students who successfully learn after following instructions; but a close look shows that they didn't learn solely by passively following instructions but primarily because of a special curiosity/interest/motivation/talent they had, and/or access to privileged learning opportunities outside school. Privileges that foster learning can be living with skilled and knowledgeable people, having family who are sensitive to one's needs and talents; knowing someone who inspires interest, experimentation, and study; or having the time and resources to discover and explore interests on one's own. Shouldn't teachers at all levels have the support they need to provide this kind of support to all learners? If they did, would schools resemble today's institutions?

Do students who enjoy such privileges even need to go to school to learn? And what happens to all the other students who follow the instructions without understanding? Don't they learn that they are dumb and incapable of learning, when nothing could be further from the truth?

For example, students who study chemistry should leave school with an understanding of chemistry that makes them intelligent users and consumers of the natural and synthetic chemicals used in foodstuffs and other products—and makes them informed advocates and voters on matters of food safety, industrial regulation, and environmental protection. Yet our schools pass chemistry students who are unable to evaluate the safety of products they purchase or the value of government policies to regulate the use of harmful chemicals. This kind of “anti-learning” feeds the anti-intellectual/anti-science current so strong—and so harmful—in US culture.

What about the few students who do learn basic chemistry in school and go on to earn advanced degrees in chemistry, chemical engineering, biochemistry, etc.? Do they have the holistic understanding and moral and ethical character to resist employment in firms and government agencies who use chemistry to generate profits through the abuse of consumers and the environment? In today's schools, both kinds of chemistry student, ordinary and advanced, learn a lesson larger than the science of chemistry. Ordinary students learn that they cannot understand something precise and technical (like chemistry), and advanced students learn that they cannot understand something complex and psychologically sophisticated, like the socioeconomic role of chemistry and the ethics of a true scientific search for holistic wisdom.

Following instructions leads to following orders in the workplace and government or military service, not to critical thinking and responsible citizenship. So many sisters and brothers in our global family finish their education too ignorant for intelligent sociopolitical action and unable to learn much on their own. Why? Because their innate capacity to learn has atrophied from years of abuse and underuse in schools, as expressed eloquently by Paulo Freire:

The struggle for humanization, for the emancipation of labor, for the overcoming of alienation, for the affirmation of men and women as persons ... is possible only because dehumanization although a concrete historical fact, is *not* a given destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed (2000, p. 44).

And yet, some unprivileged learners manage to swim against the dehumanizing experience of their schooling and achieve extraordinary things. This confirms our experience that every human being has the potential to contribute significantly to society and to live a full life.

Some examples of humanizing education are the master craftsperson who learns to create tools (with or without a teacher) when existing ones do not serve and the teacher (ditto) who learns to create pedagogy to suit each learner.

Following instructions reinforces a sense of inadequacy and creates in both learners and teachers dependence on those who give the instructions. Teachers may take pride in offering students well thought-out and prepared instructions, but they cannot avoid a sense—acknowledged or suppressed—that only a few of their students, mostly those who match their own social biases, will do well.

3. Negative: Simplifying facilitates learning. A common myth in education is that simplifying the subject matter will assist learning it. Simplification may well

facilitate testing and ineffective teaching methodologies, but it falsifies the subject by hiding its complexity and blocks holistic, intuitive aspects of learning.

“Standardized”—a euphemism for simplified—curricula, learning materials, and tests are a hugely profitable, scandalously corrupt industry closely tied to corporate politics (Apple, 2001; Apple, Kenway, & Smith, 2005; Aronowitz, 2000; and Kohn, 2000). When simplified content is standardized for mass deployment through ease of testing and presentation, without regard for the individualization required for internalization and mastery, learning outcomes fall through the floor.

For example, the prospect of mastering important languages beyond the mother tongue(s) tantalizes many of us, but when we are presented with simplified materials: vocabulary lists, rules of syntax and articulation, cultural information, and set dialogs and texts, we rarely acquire the ability to express our feelings and understand fluent speech—even after years of study. Ignoring the creative, holistic, intuitive nature of language and instead simplifying the target language and relying on memory does not result in language acquisition (Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982; Gattegno, 1976; González & Melis, 2000; and Stevick, 1982; 1996). Privileged and gifted learners who have access to speakers of the target language may succeed; the rest are considered dull, or accept the limits of “reading knowledge” without nuanced understanding or spontaneous fluency (like a dull knife, reading knowledge can do more harm than good).

Nearly everyone can become bi- and multi-lingual without any instruction at all, if they have complex and sustained opportunities to interact with speakers and writers in the target language—and if they are free of fears that can block natural

language acquisition in adults (Dulay et al., 1982; Krashen, 2003; Krashen & McField, 2005).

Modern myths obscure the pitiful results of modern teaching methodologies and inhibit urgently needed critical research. In the case of language instruction, the outcome is a lack of desperately needed intercultural understanding and interlingual communication skills, and, more generally, a lack of understanding of the cultural diversity essential for flourishing in the rapidly changing cultural environments that Zygmunt Bauman called “liquid modernity” (2007). Modern education obscures its failure to educate by rewarding superficial verbal knowledge while subjecting students to harmful discipline and punishment. Largely missing is the humility of the truly educated, who embrace their ignorance in the face of an immense cosmos and respect and care for their small place in it.

4. Negative: Imitation facilitates learning. Many teachers spend a good deal of energy modeling behaviors they want to see in their students. They politely answer questions with full sentences, write neatly, express socially acceptable opinions, obey their superiors without much question, and avoid taboo subjects completely. Science teachers model scientific reasoning and lab procedures; language teachers enunciate the target language clearly and use interesting vocabulary and correct grammar; math teachers solve problems on the board while explaining what they are doing; and so on. However, imitation can only give the appearance of learning (Bourdieu, 2004; Gattegno, 1976; Kuhn, 1996; Latour & Woolgar, 1979; and Stevick, 1989). Imitation may sometimes be first step, but for learning to be deep, integrated, and lasting, learners need to acquire the elements of

understanding by experimenting in various contexts—playing with the subject—until they achieve mastery (Bruner et al., 1976; Bruner, 1996; Bransford et al., 2000; Dulay et al., 1982; Holt, 1995; Kohl, 1991; Montessori, 1967; Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky & Kozulin, 2012; and Young & Messum, 2011).

Nonetheless, so many teachers continue to teach as they were taught, and come to expect that only exceptional students can learn, ignoring the fact that modeling puts the students in a passive role while learning is an active process. Imitation may not be a significant part of effective pedagogy, but it is a big part of dehumanizing behaviorist conditioning (Gattegno, 1970; 1973; 1987a).

Imitation of peers and role models, though, not only impedes learning by suppressing agency, curiosity, and awareness, but it fosters fear of failing to imitate successfully and encourages acquisition of competitive and micro/aggressive behaviors, making oppressors of the oppressed. This is as serious as the poor learning outcomes obtained with modeling pedagogies because it solidifies classist, ethnic, heteronormative, racist, sexist and other prejudices as identity-defining behavior above and beyond biased ideas. Students readily imitate teacher behaviors when they are kept in passive, “spectator” mode for extended periods of time, and they even more readily imitate their peers, above all, when the teachers are not looking. Modeling and imitation, then, should only be used sparingly and carefully to promote learning.

For example, teachers often give boys more time and opportunities to ask “why” questions while restricting girls to “correct answer” questions (e.g. as reported by Myra and David Sadker, 1994). Cruel micro/aggressive behaviors picked up by

imitating peers, teachers, and media models (and sometimes by echoing poor learning materials) are not easy to shed without intense self-education for which school offers little help (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Valencia, 2010; Valenzuela, 1999; and Yosso, 2006). When students respect and imitate teachers not worthy of their respect, they acquire behaviors without fully understanding their content and effect on others. In so doing, they learn to distrust their own identity, perceptions, and sense of empathy—especially when unfamiliar with targets not found in their home communities. Unconscious imitation of models is a mechanism of blind social reproduction facilitated by the passive role forced on students during their school years (Andersen, 1999; Guinier & Torres, 2003; hooks, 2003; Matsuda, 1989; Orelus, 2010; 2013; and Parker, Deyhle & Villenas, 1999).

5. Positive: Learning is invisible. We cannot observe learning directly, as it is an interior process, and we have little understanding of how it works neurologically (Horgan, 1999), but there is compelling evidence that it takes place in deep sleep, when it seems that we “digest” and make long term some of what we obtain from our waking experiences, which may include exploratory play, motivated practice, encounters with novel material, or trauma (Bransford et al., 2000; Bruner, 1996; Bruner et al., 1976; Gattegno, 1987a; and Rosaldo, 1993). We can observe that learning has occurred, but we cannot observe learning itself, and so unscientific, lackluster, hit-and-miss pedagogy tends to get a pass because it is not easy to explain its poor learning outcomes or propose alternatives in compelling terms.

We can only infer what might connect the activity with the result, guided by pragmatic desire to assist those who have so much to learn (ourselves not

excepted). Observation is a teacher's most important skill, and a deeply rewarding one, because it leads to intimacy and trust in learning relationships between learners who come to know and respect one another as unique colleagues exploring the universe, not exemplars of stereotyped social identities. It is necessary for teachers to "be with" the learners and observe them without bias or manipulative intentionality. This can de-center the teacher and her teaching, de-center the curriculum, de-center the methodology, and center learning in community (Moffett, 1983; Moffett & Wagner, 1983).

Behaviorists advise eliciting and shaping behaviors, rather than trying to observe and understand unique individuals, and the outcome is dehumanizing reductionism. If we remain mindful of students as human beings, we immediately notice that each has her own approach to learning, which is not necessarily reflected in her behaviors or served by any specific curriculum or pedagogy. When we make it a habit to see our students as autonomous beings (rather than cohorts), and when we stop concentrating on the curriculum or on our own teaching performance, we begin to see that freeing students to experiment and play with the material will give us opportunities to observe their unique ways of being (Gattegno, 1988). Only then can we be of real help to them on their learning paths, and see results that far outstrip those of existing schooling. Equally important, this approach embraces diversity of all kinds: ability, culture, ethnicity, gender, race, religion, and sexuality, not in rhetoric or theory only, but in giving free play to learners to bring their cultural and experiential knowledge bases to bear on their learning and, in so doing, to share with their peers and teachers in vital and productive learning communities.

The Catastrophe of Education

The inability of university graduates to gain headway against the multiple problems that make modern life so stressful and dangerous should be proof positive that their education is faulty. But by the time they are schooled for 20 years, the majority have their critical faculties blunted and their vision narrowed by specialized blinders, so when they look around they don't see others different from themselves and fail to try to find a better way—and trying *is* the better way . . .

Graduates often identify with power and choose to protect their privilege at the cost of those suffering at lower socioeconomic levels (Aronowitz, 2000; Boidin, Cohen, & Grosfoguel, 2011; Bowers, 1993; Chomsky, 2000, 2003; Giroux, 1995; Holland & Eisenhart, 2000; Labaree, 1999; and Spivak, 2003, 2012). They send their own children to the same fate, weighted down by impossibly heavy backpacks of biased beliefs about class, gender, money, race, religion, sex, learning itself—backpacks with no room for the joy of creation, critical reflection, empathetic community, experimentation, exploration, peaceful contemplation, self-expression, spontaneous play and humor, and service—all constituents of the biologically sound learning at the heart of the ancient pedagogies that kept our ancestors successfully living through tens of thousands of generations before the invention of what is called “civilization.”

The catastrophe of school might eclipse the positive things that happen in existing schools. But instead, adults (school workers, parents, and citizens) reinforce their recollections of the good things, no matter how scarce, and deny the hurt and wasted time—as if such desperate fantasies will erase the ruinous social

and economic oppression that darkens our prospects for a livable future (Scruton, 2010). Constructive pedagogy begins with emptying those backpacks and discarding our dependence on myths, both positive and negative, so we can recuperate approaches to learning that are sustainable and capable of addressing the globalized world we live in.

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