

Schooling as Object: An Essay on
Learning the Language of Critique

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The Teacher

I was approached in the spring of 2000 by my student, Michael Quarantello, about the possibility of teaching a philosophy course at The Walker School, where Michael is a student and I am a teacher. After a time it became clear that this class was not going to make it onto the schedule for the 2000-2001 academic year, and Michael suggested that I consider teaching the class as an independent study class with himself as the lone student. I agreed, and established a syllabus that reflected almost exclusively, and perhaps somewhat selfishly, readings and topics which interested me. Michael agreed to read what I had included on the list (the *Meno*, the *Theaetetus*, Gettier's counterexample paper, and selections by Wittgenstein and Descartes, to name a few) and we agreed to meet for a minimum of one hour per week, during my planning period, to discuss the readings. I thus had the summer to read, prepare, and consider a general direction for the course beyond that established by the selected readings.

At the same time, I was teaching a graduate course in social and cultural foundations of education here at

Georgia State University, a course called EPSF 7120: Social and Cultural Foundation of Education. One of the texts for the course includes a chapter by Peter McLaren, in which McLaren writes:

Corporate rock's celebration of the subversion of adult authority gives its youthful listeners the illusion of resistance but not a language of critique or hope. It works to produce a politics of pleasure but simultaneously functions as a form of repression and forgetting - a motivated social amnesia and forced disavowal of the nation's complicitousness in racial demonization and colonialism.¹

I had assigned this article in this course before, and had always either been asked by the class, or, asked of the class, "Critique of what? And what is this language of critique? And what does it look like? And where would it fit in the school curriculum?" It occurred to me that the independent study course I was to teach in the fall might provide a venue for raising questions about schooling that seldom are addressed in school, and I decided to focus our conversations upon ourselves, as it were, to examine schooling in the context of epistemology. The epistemic critique of schooling became an important goal of my teaching activities related to this course.

¹ Peter McLaren, "Education as a Political Issue (II)," in H. Svi Shapiro and David E. Purpel, *Critical Social Issues in American Education: Transformation in a Postmodern World* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum and Associates, 1998), 291.

The Student

It is my belief that our schools need a change in more ways than are currently being addressed by today's politicians. By this I mean wholesale reform of the curriculum (as opposed to minor modifications of the curriculum) such that new courses are considered while existing courses are reviewed. For myself, the philosophical study which I have undertaken has allowed many opportunities that were not previously available to me because of my school's lack of philosophical instruction. Philosophy, perhaps because of the nature of the study, has been excluded from most basic, and even elective, curriculum in many high schools.

One has to understand that the confines of adolescent thought very seldom permit students to see beyond the scope of their daily routine. I did not understand, nor did I care to understand, what it was I was learning. How easily it was that I accepted what was put in front of me simply because the hand that placed it there was that of a teacher. I consider myself lucky, because it is my own interest in epistemology that led to the uncovering of the problem which is at hand with today's basic skills curriculum. By this I mean the blind, one-sided educational process that too often excludes students and teachers in the decision making. The philosophy class I am currently enrolled in has allowed me to take a step back from my

upper middle-class thought process and to further understand what true school reform might consist of.

It has also encouraged me not to accept those things which some others easily accept, such as the way courses are taught, as well as the content of those courses. Those reading this essay might ask themselves, "So what's so different? For an adolescent to question authority is as common as the act itself." The answer to that question is this: it is very normal for a student with a great deal of immaturity to say, "I don't want to go to school," but for a student to say, "The school is wrong for reasons cited," and then offer suggestions or thoughts on how to improve the school, is the type of mature, intelligent rebellion that may be brought through philosophical instruction.

I believe that a lack of questioning, possibly directly related to the lack of philosophical instruction in many high schools, has led to a routine in which the true essence of what it means to "learn" and "know" are lost. To question is to think further, on a personal basis, about what is actually being taught and its application to society. Because of the tutelage I have sought on my own, I now question the relationship of a student and a teacher: that is, whether one can truly learn anything, or whether a teacher can truly teach anything. On a day to day basis, through the aforementioned routine, I see first hand what it is to be told something and not question. This routine introduces moral and practical questions. I say both moral

and practical because each is unique in its application to a certain topic. While one might question the morality of what one is taught in an English class, another might question the practicality of what they are told in a mathematics course. This elevated level of consideration, including, but not limited to, thinking, reasoning, and questioning, should be offered to all students, in order for them to form their own opinions, and possibly change what schools are capable of accomplishing.

Reform could start with philosophical courses, similar to the one I am in now. Introducing key philosophical ideas, as well as helping students to understand what schools could accomplish, would not only allow for a better educated society, but a more intellectually active one as well. Another key to this introduction is that the philosophical ideas could be introduced at a young age, perhaps in middle school. I realize that some of the more advanced ideas in philosophy may not be understood by students that are younger (indeed, many are not understood by adults), but the ideas themselves, presented as situations that the students would understand, could be a start. It is not that I am pushing "philosophy" because the students would not even have to know it is philosophy they are being taught. What philosophy has allowed me to do, I believe, would have been more beneficial at a younger age, when I was still forming my impressions of the world.

The Teacher Responds

Michael's enthusiasm gives me hope for the future, but not without pause. I hesitate to endorse the claim that merely by having been taught philosophy, students will somehow become better people, gain intelligence, and become more able to live an examined life. It may happen that way, but likely despite having a course in philosophy rather than because of it.

What I think the absence of philosophy from the typical curriculum represents is a failure, and indeed an unwillingness, to encourage students to critique, generally. That this critique might turn to schooling is probably beside the point. Is this notion of critique the same as critical thinking? In other words, am I suggesting a logical relationship whereby, as philosophy demands critical thinking and critical thinking should be taught in the schools, thus should philosophy be taught in schools to satisfy the demand for students to learn to think critically? No, since I am certain that any class that tried to teach critical thinking would do little more than teach *about* critical thinking - an important distinction, to be sure. Instead, I would like to think that a philosophy class, possibly more so than any other class,

might be a place where critical thinking could occur most often and might therefore encourage its development.

Oddly, this was so in our case because there was no formal curriculum imposed upon us, no standards to be met except our own, and no expectations that this or that chapter would be "covered" by such and such a date. I do think that Michael demonstrated the kind of critical thinking that advocates have been encouraging, but not because I taught him to do so; rather, because I permitted him to do so. That this same phenomenon might have occurred in his other classes is reasonable to suppose provided that the kinds of external restrictions imposed by testing, standards, competition, objectives and the like were absent. I fear that, in many classrooms, there is too little time given over to noticing how students are thinking, or (sadly) if they are thinking at all.

This is likely less the case in a private school like Walker, although I hasten to add that, in some respects, private schools are (as businesses) necessarily more attuned to the demands of the educational marketplace. For example, test scores (so important to parents looking to outdo their neighbor in providing the "best" education for their child) must not only improve (if that is even possible) but remain consistently high. To the degree that

a private school feels the need to focus on the kinds of measurable educational outcomes that objectives-oriented teaching entails as a function of competition with its market opponents, I am not sure that either critical thinking, generally, or philosophy, specifically, is assured a place even in many private schools.

One reader of an early draft of this essay raised the point that arguing for the inclusion of a philosophy course is different from explaining how such a course will find space in a schedule already filled with state- or district-mandated requirements for most students: four years of mathematics, three of science, and so on. Despite my opposition to recent proposals in this state to increase the length of the school day (alas, when is enough, enough?), I find such proposals interesting inasmuch as they introduce possibilities for the inclusion of courses, activities, and experiences heretofore excluded from the typical seven-hour school day. That I expect such proposals to translate into more of the same, rather than something new, explains my resistance.

Another critic pointed out that, as soon as such a course was added to the curriculum, content-standards, objectives and the like would rain down from above and, under the guise of accountability, provide the kind of

framework that would make it difficult, if not impossible, to wander far from multiple-choice questions about epistemology. I don't know how to respond to this except to agree that it would, first, defeat the purpose of having such a course (at least the purpose that I have envisioned) and, second, likely be unavoidable.

And who would teach this course? The devil is indeed in the details.

But back to optimism. bell hooks wrote about the need to "think critically about ourselves and our lives" lest we find ourselves unable to "move forward, to change, to grow."² I think that hooks is correct. She calls the kind of teaching that engenders this "engaged pedagogy" and I would submit that, in a class with only one student, one is always engaged.³ Being familiar with Peter McLaren's work, I am fairly certain that the language of critique that he had in mind was not related to a high school philosophy course - indeed, am I equally certain that bell hooks would not align herself with McLaren in matters philosophical. These differences aside, part of the trouble that my graduate students have is making the important connection between

² bell hooks, "Ecstasy: Teaching and Learning Without Limits," in Fred Schultz, ed., *Sources: Notable Selections in Education* (Guilford, CT: Dushkin/McGraw-Hill, 1997), 230.

³ Ibid.

what scholars like McLaren and hooks have written, on the one hand, and what their own practice in the classroom and as school leaders might become, on the other. Therefore, it is both useful and necessary to attempt to synthesize thoughts from diverse sources to foster speculation on the advantages of a course like the one Michael and I enjoyed. We both believe that the course was different from others we have taken or taught: Michael because of the interesting and novel content, primarily, and I for the opportunity to engage my lone student in an authentic dialog on complicated topics of interest to me. But what else? Perhaps the feeling that we were getting away with something by enjoying the conversations so much? The sense that we were putting one over on the others by criticizing formal schooling within a formal school? At times, perhaps yes to all of these. The important point is that, by making advantageous use of the freedom of ideas upon which philosophy depends, the school became an object of examination and, yes, critique. That it fit rather well within the context of the course is, perhaps, the best argument that one can make for including philosophy as part of the high school curriculum.