

Improving Learning Environments
ED 431
Dynamics of Learning Environments
CIE 412
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Wednesday 5:00 P.M. – 8:00 P.M.

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The drama of education is always a narrative of transformation: Act I is life as we find it—the given, the known or the received, the settled or the agreed upon orthodoxy or the status quo. Act II is the fireworks, the moments of upheaval and dissonance, the experiences of discovery and surprise, the energy of remodeling and refashioning. Act III is the achievement of new ways of knowing and behaving, expanded horizons and fresh possibilities. Act III, of course, will necessarily be recast in some future educational encounter as a new Act I, for the drama is never done: there is always more to do, more to learn and know, more to experience and accomplish. The drama of education is the drama of perpetual change.

The large themes that constitute the best traditions in education are sites for investigation rather than settled dogma, a series of challenges to engage. For example, the challenge of democracy itself: What is democracy? What does schooling in a democracy look like? How might we build democratic communities in our classrooms? There is an apparent mismatch between increased standardization and the tightening of bureaucratic control over schools at a time such as this—a moment of unprecedented immigration, movement, and dislocation, a time when the need to model living democratically is at its zenith. There is a palpable contradiction between a nation founded on the principle of equality that, nonetheless, relentlessly pursues a policy of identifying and quantifying a widening array of inequalities. The great American poet of democracy, Walt Whitman, wrote that democracy “is a great word whose history, I suppose, remains unwritten because that history has yet to be enacted.”

If democracy is a special social arrangement, how would we describe its specific character? And if education in a democracy requires something different from the requirements of education, say, in a totalitarian or royal society, then what is that different something?

The short answer is obvious: totalitarianism demands obedience and conformity, hierarchy, command and control. Royalty requires allegiance. Democracy, by contrast, requires free people—coming together voluntarily—who are capable of both self-realization and, at the same time, full participation in a shared political and economic life. Democracy is a form of associative living in which people must assume and fight to achieve political and social equality, acknowledge a common spark of humanity in each soul, and embrace a level of uncertainty, incompleteness, and the inevitability of change. There simply are no immutable, fixed standards, the same for all, that will ultimately serve democratic purposes.

Teachers in democratic classrooms cannot be mechanical cogs in a bureaucratically-driven machine, nor place-holders in an impersonal system, but rather must think of themselves becoming ethical actors with a large degree of flexibility and autonomy in order to attend to and support the growth of children. In a democracy teachers must be models of thoughtfulness and care, exemplars of problem-solving and decision-making, people capable of asking deep questions, drawing necessary connections, incorporating the surprising and the unexpected and the new, as it occurs, into classroom life.

Assessment in democratic classrooms, then, must be transparent and public, collectively decided upon, and rooted in ongoing student work. It cannot be a separate and isolated event, above and beyond the control or reach of teachers and students; rather,

assessment becomes a broad, relevant and connected part of classroom life, an exercise providing an ongoing look at progress and need.

Another challenge involves “the ecology of childhood”—the task of making schools and other settings good environments and communities in which children develop as whole and healthy people rather than test factories where kids get evaluated in one-sided ways. The classroom should align to the child and the community, and not the other way around; there must be a focus, then, on the quality of children’s lives, and on opportunities for imagination, expression, and experimentation in a safe and buoyant space.

A further challenge is for inclusion, the democratic goal of educating all students for participation in intellectual and academic complexity. This means both breaking down the barriers to full participation of historically oppressed or excluded groups, and offering everyone “an intellectually ambitious education.”

And joined with these and at the center of things is the challenge to see the larger society as it really is, not avoiding the difficulties, but facing issues of injustice, racism, imperial ambition, with the schools at least partially disfigured when they become sites that reinforce inequalities of class, e.g., or race or gender. The teacher’s ambition might become, then to link democratic possibilities in education to fresh possibilities in our larger social life.

A fundamental teaching challenge is to see your students—beyond the blizzard of labels based on deficits—as three-dimensional creatures, people of heart, mind, and spirit, much like yourself. This may sound simple and straight-forward, but it can be excruciatingly difficult to bring to life in environments with a toxic habit of labeling, or with the deadening obsession of standardized ways of seeing and knowing.

Another challenge is to look deeply into the contexts within which teaching occurs—social surround, historical flow, cultural web. While the unexamined teaching life is hardly worth living, the examined life is full of pain and difficulty—after all, the contexts of our lives include unearned privileges and undeserved suffering, murderous drugs and crushing work, a howling sense of hopelessness for some and the palpable threat of annihilation for others. To be aware of the social and moral universe we inhabit and share, aware, too, of what has yet to be achieved in terms of human possibility, is to be a teacher capable of hope and struggle, outrage and action, a teacher teaching for social justice and liberation.

The fundamental message of the teacher, after all, is this: You can change your life. Whoever you are, wherever you’ve been, whatever you’ve done, the teacher invites you to a second chance, another round, perhaps a different conclusion. The teacher posits possibility, openness, and alternative; the teacher points to what could be, but is not yet. The teacher beckons you to change your path, and so she has but one basic rule: to reach.

But, of course, the teacher can only create a context, set a stage, open a curtain. The teacher’s task is excruciatingly complex precisely because it is idiosyncratic and improvisational—as inexact as a person’s mind or a human heart, as unique and inventive as a friendship or a love affair. The teacher’s work embraces background, environment, setting, surround, position, situation, connection. And relationship. As Martin Heidegger said, teaching is tougher than learning in only one respect: teaching requires the teacher to *let learn*. Learning requires action, choice, and assent from the student. Teaching, then, is undertaken with hope, but without guarantees. Teaching is an act of faith.

Another basic challenge is to create an environment that will challenge and nurture the wide range of students who will enter your classrooms. There must be multiple entry points toward learning and a range of routes to success. The teacher builds the context, and that's what we will try to do here together. The teacher's ideas, preferences, values, instincts, and experiences are worked up in the learning environment. It is essential to reflect about what you value, your expectations and your standards—try to remember that the dimensions you work with are not just feet and inches, but also hopes and dreams. Think about what one senses walking through the door—What is the atmosphere? What quality of experience is anticipated? What technique is dominant? What voice will be apparent? What does *your* environment say? What would it say if fully reflected your values? How could it be improved?

Education lives an excruciating paradox precisely because of its association with and location in schools. Education is about opening doors, opening minds, opening possibilities; school, by contrast, is about sorting and punishing, grading and ranking and certifying. Education is unconditional—it asks nothing in return. School demands obedience and conformity as a precondition to attendance. Education is surprising and unruly and disorderly, while the first and fundamental law of school is to follow orders. An educator unleashes the unpredictable, while a schoolteacher too often starts with an unhealthy obsession with classroom management.

Inside every student—from kindergarten through graduate school—lurks an implicit question, often unformed and unconscious, rarely spoken. It's a simple question on its surface, but a question that bubbles with hidden and surprising meanings, always yeasty, unpredictable, potentially volcanic. Who in the world am I? The student looks inward at the self, and simultaneously faces outward, toward the expanding circles of context. Who *am* I, in the world?

Think of the college freshman, the first year medical student, the thesis writer, the child anxiously looking at her mother on the first morning at day care. Who am I? What place is this? What will become of me here? What larger universe awaits me? What can I make of what I've been made?

The aware teacher knows that the question exists, that it perseveres. The wide-awake teacher looks for opportunities to prod the question, to awaken or agitate it, to pursue it across a range of boundaries, known as well as unknown. The challenge to the teacher—massive and dynamic—is to extend a sense in each student of both alternative and opportunity, to answer in an expansive, generous way a corollary question: What in the world are my choices and my chances?

Each of us is better equipped to engage these questions if we work hard to understand the commitments we bring to the project of teaching. Some of these commitments may apply to all teachers and all teaching—a commitment to enlightenment, perhaps, a commitment to empowerment, although even this may be arguable—while others may be specific to this particular person at this unique time in this distinct place.

This class will be conducted as a seminar. This is because thinking is a social activity, impossible to achieve without the stimulation of other minds; we need each other, we need feeling and curiosity and engagement. In a democracy there must be discussion, deliberation, judgment, dialogue. In every dialogue there will necessarily be mistakes, misperceptions, growth, struggle, and emotion. That's OK. We must each

speak here with the possibility of being heard, of touching hearts or changing minds. And we must listen with the possibility of altering the angle of our own regard.

In this seminar we will wonder together about the commitments each of us brings to the project of teaching. We will search for shared edges, but we will also explore and try to honor different priorities, values, and distinct emphases. Because this is a seminar your presence and participation is necessary. We will together create a space for dialogue, back and forth, the authentic exchange of ideas. Talk and listen.

A final note: Your presence is required. You will not receive credit if you are not here. If you're sick, I'll arrange for you to sleep in my office or at an infirmary nearby. If you want to bring a child because your childcare failed, fine. Is this clear? Is there any room for misinterpretation or ambiguity? *Show up or be doomed.*

* READINGS *

REQUIRED:

1. Freedom School Curriculum -- distributed by Ayers
2. Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*
3. bell hooks. *Teaching to Transgress*
4. Maxine Greene. *The Dialectic of Freedom*
5. William Ayers. *Teaching Toward Freedom*
6. Michael Lebowitz. *Build It Now*

NOVEL

(Choose One):

1. Sapphire. *Push*
2. Ernest Gaines. *A Lesson Before Dying*
3. Carolyn Chute. *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*
4. Keri Hulme. *The Bone People*
5. Anthony Burgess. *Clockwork Orange*
6. Richard Wright. *Native Son*
7. James Baldwin. *Go Tell It on The Mountain*
8. Sandra Cisneros. *The House on Mango Street*
9. Francine Prose. *After*

MEMOIR

(Choose one):

1. Greg Michie. *Holler If You Hear Me*
2. Marv Hoffman. *Chasing Hellhounds*
3. Sylvia Ashton-Warner. *Teacher*
4. Geoffrey Canada. *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun*
5. Richard Wright. *Black Boy*
6. Luis Rodriguez. *Always Running*
7. Claude Brown. *Manchild in the Promised Land*
8. Deborah Meier. *The Power of Their Ideas*

ETHNOGRAPHY

(Choose one):

1. Alan Peshkin. *The Color of Friends, The Color of Strangers*
2. William Finnegan. *Cold New World*
3. Michele Fine. *Framing Dropouts*
4. Chris Carger. *Of Borders and Dreams*
5. William Ayers. *The Good Preschool Teacher*
6. William Ayers. *A Kind and Just Parent*

ISSUES

(Choose One):

1. Gloria Ladson-Billings. *The Dream Keepers*
2. Michele Foster. *Black Teachers on Teaching*
3. Julie Landsman. *A White Teacher Talks About Race*
4. Angela Valenzuela. *Subtractive Schooling*
5. Sarah Sentilles. *Taught by America*
6. Moulthrop, Calegar, Eggers. *Teachers Have It Easy*
7. Mara Sapon-Shevin. *Because We Can Change the World*
8. David Armington. *The Living Classroom*
9. Herb Kohl. *She Would Not Be Moved*
10. Herb Kohl. *Stupidity and Tears*
11. Lisa Delpit. *Other People's Children*
12. Luis Moll. *Educating Latino Students*
13. Sonia Nieto. *The Light in Their Eyes*
14. Christine Sleeter and Carl Grant. *Making Choices for Multicultural Education*
15. Pat Carini. *Starting Strong*
16. Pedro Noguera. *City Schools and The American Dream*
17. David Hilfiker. *Urban Injustice: How Ghettos Happen*
18. Theresa Perry. *Young, Gifted, and Black*
19. Tim Wise. *White Like Me*
20. Lisa Delpit. *The Skin That We Speak*
21. John Dewey. *Democracy and Education*

FILM

(Choose One):

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|-------------------------|-------------|
| "Not One Less" | - China |
| "Kids" | - US |
| "Mi Vida Loca" | - US |
| "Do The Right Thing" | - US |
| "Menace II Society" | - US |
| "Rabbit Proof Fence" | - Australia |
| "The Magdalene Sisters" | - Ireland |
| "To Have and To Be" | - France |

ASSIGNMENT ONE:

We will be reading the Freedom School Curriculum and several books in common. The first is Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a complicated and layered book—not a particularly easy read—that will likely take you some time and sustained commitment. If you've read Freire, please review it, and then read Dewey. I'd like you to begin this by next week, paying attention to questions like these:

- What's his big idea?
- What are three or four arguments he develops?
- What is he in favor of? What is he opposed to?
- What evidence does he present?
- What are three or four things you find entirely confusing or at least problematic?
- Is there a story or an argument or a quote that is simply dazzling? What page?
- Is there something that is simply stupid? What page?
- Can you discuss an aspect of your own teaching in light of Freire's argument?

Also next week please bring to class a physical rendering (diagram, map, photo-collage, model, diorama, architectural scheme, or whatever) of a learning environment. I would prefer this to be of the classroom or school or lab or gym or community or home you teach in now, but for those of you not teaching, this representation can be of any environment where some intentional learning occurs that you've known at any time. Make this representation as clear and as durable as possible—other people will want to “read” it, to understand it—and you will want to use it, refer to it, more than once.

In accordance with the Americans with Disability Act, students with a documented disability may request reasonable accommodations that they might need to participate fully. Students may be eligible for:

- Exam modifications
- Alternative print formats
- Sign language interpreting
- Real-time captioning
- Class relocations
- Assistance with academic modifications
- Access problem solving
- Advocacy and referrals
- And other reasonable accommodations

If you have questions or need help the Office of Disability Services is available to assist students at (312) 413-2183 (voice) or (312) 413-0123 (TTY only). The Office of Disability Services works to ensure the accessibility of UIC programs, classes, and services to students with disabilities. Services are available for students who have documented learning disabilities, vision or hearing impairments, emotional or physical disabilities.

OSS is currently revising and reformatting all COE admission and advising materials to include a similar statement regarding student access to reasonable accommodations. These materials will be sent to the Office of Disability Services in electronic format and hardcopy. If students need the materials in alternative formats, that office will provide the materials for them.

If you have questions or concerns, feel free to contact Richard Allegra in the Office of Disability Services.