

ORION

MAGAZINE

The Schools We Need

When public education fails, democracy fails with it

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IT'S A COLD DECEMBER EVENING in Lexington, Kentucky, and I'm sitting by the fire with a teetering stack of final essays from ENG 104: Freshman Comp. I know what I'm in for. All semester I've been hectoring my fifty-odd students to insert commas after introductory phrases, to improve paragraph development, and to remember that the phrase *for granted* (as in "take for granted") means "to accept," whereas *for granite*, the phrase they often use instead, could only suggest homage to that igneous rock, something akin to W. H. Auden's poem "In Praise of Limestone."

It's been a tough three months. I had been away from full-time teaching for a few years, and away from eighteen-year-olds for longer. From 1995 to 2005, I taught four, sometimes five, sections of Freshman Comp each semester. I read roughly 8,000 essays during that decade—200,000 pages, 50,000,000 words. After all that, I took a little time off to do some writing of my own. But when my book was finished, the department chair ordered me back to the front line.

And Freshman Comp is the front line. All incoming college students take it, and their numbers are on the rise. Consequently, we are legion as well, we writing teachers, we circlers of the comma splice, we well-intentioned, underpaid masses. Despite what you may have heard, we are not covert operatives, Maoist holdovers who have infiltrated the ranks of higher education. While I do have major concerns about the predatory nature of corporate capitalism, as I imagine many of us do by now, my motives, like those of my colleagues, are mostly pure. Our goals can be simply stated if not easily achieved. Namely, we want to teach your children to think for themselves and to communicate those thoughts through effective use of language.

Of course, unless you are a Dadaist poet, you have to write about *something*. But after reading thousands of essays (a noun I much prefer to "arguments") about abortion, gun control, and gay rights—all important issues—I decided that, on my return to Freshman Comp, I would ask my freshmen to essay (a verb I prefer to

“argue”) on a topic they all presumably knew something about: high school. I began with a simple prompt for the first essay: evaluate the education you received over the last four years.

Next I asked my students to write profiles of their best or worst teachers. They seemed to like this, largely because it gave them a chance to vent some pent-up spleen and settle some scores, at least on paper. I noticed that most students chose to describe the poor teachers and to enumerate their many flaws. Very few—and these were mostly students from parochial schools—chose to profile a good teacher.

After that exercise, I asked my freshmen to describe assignments, curricula, class discussions, and books they had liked or disliked. I told them that writing is a movement back and forth between observation and insight. I said: first describe a thing in detail—a person, a place, an experience—then let that description lead to some insight, some take-away value. That’s what readers want, I emphasized, to get something out of what they have read. I told my students to try to think of me not as the teacher who would affix grades to their essays, but as an ordinary reader who was interested—which I was, and am—in what goes on these days in American high schools.

What I ended up taking away was pretty grim, both on the content level and with regard to the writing itself. In terms of content, this is the picture that emerged from those fifty essays:

- Many teachers show no passion for their subjects.
- Many teachers don’t seem to know their subjects very well.
- Teachers often have very low expectations for their students and very lax standards (late work is rarely penalized).
- Many teachers are afraid to engage students in real critical thinking or actual dialogue; they simply rely on handouts and lectures.
- Assignments don’t seem relevant to students’ “real” lives.
- Many teachers only “teach to the test.”
- The majority of the work is far too easy and leads to boredom.
- Students express an overwhelming feeling that only their attendance and test scores are important to teachers and administrators.

I am obviously drawing these conclusions from wholly anecdotal evidence. But because the uniformity of that evidence was so overwhelming, I think it deserves some serious consideration. There were exceptions. Almost everyone could produce at least one example of a good or great teacher from high school, someone who inspired or stirred intellectual curiosity. But overall, my students described days of endless worksheets, lifeless lectures, and an impenetrable fog of boredom.



After reading all of these existential scenarios, I decided to hand out an essay by John Taylor Gatto called “Against School: How public education cripples our kids, and why.” A career New York City schoolteacher, Gatto argues that students are bored because they are *supposed* to be. The education system is intentionally designed to shape them into a passive mass who will, in bovine fashion, join the labor force and become unthinking mass producers and mass consumers. Public education, in Gatto’s estimation, is a scheme dreamed up by the captains of industry to incubate servility and ultimately sabotage anything like a real democracy. I don’t think my classes quite bought into Gatto’s conspiracy theory (“yeah . . . maybe . . . whatever”), but they did agree that the American high school classroom is pretty damn dull.

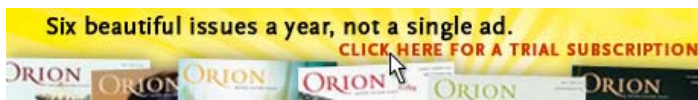
What concerned me as much as my students’ disdain for their teachers, though, was the quality of their writing. Potential ideas lay dormant and undeveloped on the page; basic rules of grammar and punctuation went unheeded; logic was all but absent. After reading that first round of essays, I began annoying my friends with dire, unprovoked brooding on the dismal state of high school education in this country. More than one friend warned me against committing what I have come to call the *Breakfast Club* fallacy. In that flawed, but seminal, ’80s high school film, the assistant principal is complaining to Janitor Carl that the kids have

changed, gone bad, turned on him. “Bullshit,” replies Carl. “The kids haven’t changed. You have.” That’s the *Breakfast Club* fallacy: the kids aren’t getting worse; I’m just getting older and more cantankerous.

Maybe so. My own high school was hardly a proving ground for intellectual inquiry. Still, I’m concerned, and for the same reasons that led George Orwell to write the essay “Politics and the English Language”: bad writing leads to bad thinking, and vice versa; uncritical acceptance of others’ prejudices can lead to people marching around with signs displaying Hitler mustaches on an African-American president. In fact, the entire faith we put in democracy as a form of governance rests on the fragile assumption that, in the realm of free and open debate, conscientious thought will more often than not carry the day. And that assumption, as Thomas Jefferson saw more clearly than the other founding fathers, rests in turn on a viable system of public education.

Citizen education “was the central, defining moment of [Jefferson’s] political and moral philosophy,” wrote political theorist Benjamin Barber. “Everything else turned on it.” Throughout his correspondence, Jefferson maintained that only an educated citizenry can practice true self-governance, and toward that end he drafted the 1779 Virginia Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge, the first piece of legislation in the young country to propose at least three years of primary education for both boys and girls. However, the bill failed, and in many respects, American public education continues to fail the Jeffersonian dream of emancipatory learning. Only now it fails in the face of a climate crisis, unsustainable resource use, and rising world populations. It fails at a time when the stakes concerning public education have never been higher.

Writer and teacher David Orr, author of the environmental education classic *Ecological Literacy*, has observed that too often in this country, education has only served to make Americans “better vandals,” uncritical consumers and exploiters of the natural world. While pundits like Thomas Friedman lament that American children are falling behind in science and math, rarely do we hear that they are being woefully ill-prepared for the arts of citizenship and stewardship—dispositions that will be every bit as necessary on Friedman’s hot and crowded planet. If we want to preserve democracy in America, radical and widespread changes in the way we educate American children and teenagers must begin at once.



POLITICIANS IN WASHINGTON have spent decades disparaging American public schools as too far gone, too decrepit to bother resuscitating. But as I look back over my students’ list of grievances concerning their own high school educations, it strikes me that none of these problems seems at all intractable. As with other American crises, such as energy policy, tax reform, and drug sentencing, the problem doesn’t seem to be a lack of solutions, but rather an absence of will. My students’ complaints, largely about the classroom environment and the content of the curriculum, can be clustered into three groups: quality of teaching, expectations placed on students, and relevance of subject matter to that much-contested realm they call “real life.”

As someone who has spent nearly twenty years in writing classrooms with late-adolescent Americans, I’d like to take a crack at this list. But before I do, it’s necessary to say a few words about the students themselves. At the risk of generalizing, it seems to me that two of the more serious problems afflicting American adolescents today are the fear of not fitting in and an astonishing lack of curiosity about the world beyond their cell phones. Popular culture instills high levels of passivity among its most vulnerable targets, the young. There is, to take one pervasive example, not a single item for sale at my local mall that asks the consumer to do something, make something, or master a skill (the store that sold telescopes and chess sets recently closed). Yet American teenagers have on average one hundred dollars a week of disposable income, which they typically spend at the mall. What they consume helps them adopt an easy, off-the-rack persona, but it does little to cultivate real self-invention, the unfolding of one’s nature that Emerson called the “chief

end of man.” This passive shaping of the self leads, I think, to a flimsy narcissism that results in a lack of curiosity about the world outside the self: real life.

A neighbor who is a longtime high school English teacher told me recently, “When these kids get to you, they won’t have learned a damn thing about writing. All I do in class is police.” Like my neighbor, many of us assume that the American youth have become captive to popular culture. Certainly this makes teaching much harder today—probably harder than it’s ever been—but it also seems like an opportunity to contest the ground we as educators have yielded too quickly to the entertainment industry. Instead of allowing the practice of accumulation to replace authentic experience, we should be creating opportunities for our students to learn how to more fully inhabit their own lives and the larger world.

Which brings me back to the teachers. The first charge: *teachers show no passion for their subjects and they don’t seem to know their subjects very well*. I would wager, along with my students, that many teachers show little passion for their subjects precisely because they don’t know them very well, or as well as they might. For this reason, some critics have proposed abolishing entirely the education departments at all American universities. I understand this sentiment. About half of my writing students are education majors, and I hear endless complaints about busywork and irrelevant assignments. One student stayed in school an extra year to earn a minor in Appalachian studies so, she told me, “I would actually know something worth teaching.”

But if we do not take on the rather cumbersome task of dismantling ed schools, we should at least insist that prospective teachers *major* in the subjects they plan to teach. That would be the most immediate and dramatic way to increase teachers’ knowledge of their subject and, presumably, their passion for it. Nothing I have found, or have observed while mentoring new teachers, inspires more confidence in front of a class than mastery of the material. Teenagers are like hyenas in their ability to sniff out uncertainty and fear in an instructor; quickly they can turn into an unruly pack, and it becomes almost impossible to regain their respect or decorum. Knowledge of and passion for one’s subject represents the surest way for teachers to keep students interested and engaged. Conversely, someone with no passion for a subject should simply not be teaching it.

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When I was a freshman in college, I took a foreign film class that was way over my head. One day, after watching Fellini’s *The Clowns*, the professor—a tall Cuban-American of some bearing—fell back against the chalkboard and said, “If you don’t cry at the end of *The Clowns*, you are not a human being!” I hadn’t cried. In fact, I hadn’t really understood the film. But I wanted to feel—about anything—what my professor felt about *The Clowns*. It wasn’t Fellini, but the teacher’s passion for Fellini, that moved and inspired me and that I recall to this day.

Now for the charge that *teachers have low expectations and the work is too easy*. Anyone who has ever hosted a European exchange student knows this to be true, relative to expectations placed on students overseas. The logical solution is to assign work that is more challenging and treat students more like adults who have to navigate a world of ethical uncertainty and information overload.

If the popular culture is cajoling adolescents to be unthinking, passive consumers, teachers must meet that message with an active, critical response. For instance, we might ask the girls to bring to class a magazine they read and the boys to do likewise. We might ask: What are the messages in every ad in your magazine? How are the messages to girls different from the messages to boys? Can the products deliver on their promises? What percentage of those promises seem true? Do those percentages differ according to gender? All are basic questions. But they will yield crucial information about gender and identity in this country, and teenage students will gain that knowledge through the use of analytical skills that can be applied in other fields.

I suspect the hesitancy by many high school teachers to hold active class discussions about real moral and ethical dilemmas may be a byproduct of how contested and politicized the word *values* has become. No one wants to talk about them because someone might become offended, or someone might say the wrong thing, or the messiness of open debate might get exposed.

A few years ago, on the first day of my Freshman Comp class, an argument broke out over whether or not “Redskins” was a racist name for a professional football team. I hadn’t expected or planned this debate, but I let it rage for half the class, trying to direct and redirect the lines of argument as best I could. It seemed like productive chaos, and afterward, the class did not emerge from the debate divided, but rather heartened, it seemed, that everyone had been given a chance to voice diverse opinions. Something important happened that day: the students created a democratic space in which to debate and consider ideas. It wasn’t because of anything I did, but simply because I didn’t get in the way of the students’ own grappling over questions of perspective, personal background, and the ability of words to both empower and harm.

And with that, I have already veered into my students’ third charge, that *high school subject matter isn’t relevant to real life*. This sentiment seems to be grounded in the suspicion that, because school budgets and salaries are determined by test scores, many teachers are simply “covering the material” in a perfunctory way, or, even more insidiously, “teaching to the test.” Neither exercise seems like real learning to adolescents, who immediately sense its contrived nature and, as a result, retain little of that knowledge from year to year. Many progressive educators have responded by pushing for a curriculum that encourages more depth than breadth. That is to say, cover less material, but examine it in ways that promote real inquiry and understanding on the part of the students.

Deborah Meier, a senior scholar at NYU’s Steinhardt School of Education and a founder of the Coalition of Essential Schools, suggests that we replace the cover-the-material mode of teaching by cultivating a “habit of mind” that can be applied to *all* material. Such a habit nurtures the intellectual skills students need to make decisions on complex matters and is based on such things as: quality of evidence (how do we know it’s true?), consideration of various viewpoints (how would it look through someone else’s eyes?), the search for patterns and causes (what are the consequences?), and relevance (who cares?). These criteria will serve students well on any standardized test because they will have been taught how to evaluate the evidence before them, regardless of what it may be. And Meier’s last question, “who cares?” speaks directly to my students’ complaint about the relevancy of subject matter, because their demand for assignments that are relevant to real life does have merit. In the year 2011, real life can be quite scary, and helping students to navigate it requires a much more challenging curriculum.

When deregulated corporations destroy entire ecosystems and the Supreme Court grants those same corporations more “rights” to express themselves as “persons” (very rich persons), the need for a more Jeffersonian form of schooling—one that emphasizes serious critical inquiry in the service of citizenship—is imperative to the future of democracy. We need schools, as novelist Mark Slouka recently wrote, that produce “men and women capable of furthering what’s best about us and forestalling what’s worst.”



THE GOOD NEWS is we can begin revitalizing both education and democracy by implementing a curriculum that incubates what I will call the “citizen-self.” As teachers, I believe our purpose should be twofold: 1) to provide the opportunity for individual self-invention among students, and 2) to create a space where that individual takes on the role and the responsibility of the social citizen. The pedagogy I have in mind combines the Romantic idea of the *bildung*, the cultivation of one’s own intellectual and psychological nature, with the Pragmatist view that such individuality must be vigorously protected by acts of citizenship. That is to say, it encourages Deborah Meier’s “habit of mind” toward the goal of helping each student determine what she or he truly thinks and feels about an issue or an idea, and it encourages what psychologist

and philosopher William James called a “habit of action,” a way of translating such thinking into citizenship. At the risk of oversimplifying, we might say that the first part cultivates the inner self, while the second shapes the outer self. But these two selves cannot be separated; each depends upon and strengthens the other.

Thomas Jefferson believed that the fundamental American impulse of this citizen-self should be anti-industrial, anti-corporation, and should cultivate a generalist approach to education and work. Jefferson also believed that both politics and education best succeed at the local level. This has proven true time and again in my own experience. In the Kentucky River watershed, at the headwaters of this ecosystem in the central Appalachian region of eastern Kentucky, some of the most fascinating chapters of this country’s history have been written, often in blood. Here, Aunt Molly Jackson (the “Pistol Packin’ Mama”) held up a coal company store and stole flour to feed starving children, here men and women stood up to strip miners whose bulldozers threatened their own land, and here country music got invented. Central Appalachia also happens to be the most biologically diverse ecosystem in North America. Yet most adolescents (and most adults) in my watershed know little or nothing about the ecosystem, the coal camps, or the blasting apart of the east Kentucky mountains; they listen to Brad Paisley and Taylor Swift instead of native singers like Loretta Lynn and Jean Ritchie.

My point isn’t necessarily that Jean Ritchie’s music is better than Brad Paisley’s (though it is), but that when students learn about artists from their particular watersheds, they begin to feel their own home place legitimated, validated. Localizing knowledge makes the curriculum more relevant to students’ own experience, and it can instill a sense of pride about the places where our students live. “When I was growing up in these mountains,” wrote Kentucky novelist Lee Smith, “I was always taught that culture was someplace else, and that when the time came, I’d be sent off to get some. Now everybody here realizes that we don’t have to go anyplace else to ‘get culture’—we’ve got our own, and we’ve had it all along.”

Taking pride in one’s place can also lead to a desire to take responsibility for that place, which is, after all, the crux of citizenship. Teachers can foster this impulse by focusing assignments on local issues, allowing chemistry, biology, English, and civics classes to be driven by a problem-solving impulse. Such learning is inevitably interdisciplinary because real problems, and real learning, rarely break down along clear disciplinary lines. If a strip mine is polluting a local source of drinking water, that is clearly a biological and chemical problem, but it is also an ethical problem grounded in lessons of history. To solve it, many fields of knowledge must be brought to bear. And to articulate the solution will require some skilled rhetoric indeed. Working to solve that problem becomes at once an experiment in stewardship (the opposite of vandalism) and citizenship (participatory democracy).

It also goes some distance toward breaking down the artificial, but very real, wall between school and life, between learning and doing. The rejection of this false dichotomy was one of the primary goals of the American Pragmatist educators like John Dewey and Jane Addams. Of the turn-of-the-century settlement school movement, Addams wrote that it “stands for application as opposed to research, for emotion as opposed to abstraction, for universal interest as opposed to specialization.” Specialization has, too often, been the enemy of educating the citizen-self. It encourages careerism as the only goal of education, and its narrowness can result in an abdication of responsibility concerning problems that lie outside of one’s specialty. These narrowly focused specialists can cause problems. Financial specialists caused the economic collapse, genetic specialists have created crops that require far more pesticide application, and we don’t yet know the full havoc caused by deep-water drilling specialists. But as we saw with BP’s cagey initial reaction to the Gulf disaster, as well as Monsanto’s outrageous contempt for farmers and seed-savers, specialization also seems to create a troubling loss of empathy.

Empathy, what Jane Addams called emotion, has largely disappeared from American public life. Our politics and punditry are too divisive, the gap between rich and poor too wide, the messages from the media too preoccupied with what William James called “the bitch-goddess SUCCESS.” We think of public life as a playing field of winners and losers, when we should be thinking about it, to borrow from Dewey, as a single

organism made up of thousands of single but interconnected cells—a whole that needs all of its parts, working cooperatively. In other words, we should be thinking about how our educational institutions can be geared less toward competitiveness and more toward turning out graduates who feel a responsibility toward their places and their peers.

Here is the crux of the matter: As we enter an era of dwindling resources and potential mass migration due to climate change, we are going to need much more empathy—perhaps more than ever before—if we hope to retain our humanity. Empathy must be the measure of our students', and our own, emotional and ethical maturity.

If my English-teaching neighbor is right, and she is simply policing student behavior until graduation, then John Taylor Gatto is also right that we are simply warehousing students in public schools until they are old enough, as the Steve Earle song goes, to “walk into the county bank and sign away your life.” That might have been Alexander Hamilton’s idea of the American Dream—making bankers rich—but it’s not what Thomas Jefferson envisioned for the country. Nor is it in the best interest of its citizens.

When someone asked Benjamin Franklin what type of government he and the other founders had birthed on this country, he famously replied, “A republic, if you can keep it.” The truth is that we have not kept it. We have relinquished it to Wall Street bankers and corporations that spend \$6 billion a year to ensure that political hirelings do their bidding. As a result, the United States has the largest income gap of any country in the Northern Hemisphere (it is also, according to the 2009 census, the largest income gap in this country’s history). The problem with this, as epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett have found, is that every single societal problem, with no exceptions, can be tied directly to income inequality. As a result, the U.S. has higher levels of mental illness, infant mortality, obesity, violence, incarceration, and substance abuse than any other country north of the equator. And we have the worst environmental record on the planet. If this is a republic, you can have it.

How do we recover, how do we reinvent, the country that Jefferson and Franklin envisioned? We must become better citizens, and that transformation must begin—and really can only begin—in better public schools.

PUTTING MY STUDENTS in situations where they might learn and practice the art of real democracy has become a large part of my own teaching, and it is with these goals in mind that I often take them to a place in eastern Kentucky called Robinson Forest. It is a brilliant remnant of the mixed mesophytic ecosystem, and it is home to the cleanest streams in the state. Yet only a short walk away from our base camp you can watch those streams die, literally turn lifeless, because of the mountaintop removal strip mining that is happening all around Robinson Forest.

A few years ago, I had one student (I’ll call him Brian) who had only signed up for one of my classes because it fit his schedule. He was, in his own words, “a right-wing nut job,” and he disagreed with virtually everything I said in class. But he was funny and respectful and I liked having him around. On our class trip to Robinson Forest, we all hiked up out of the forest to a fairly typical mountaintop removal site. The hard-packed dirt and rock was completely barren, save for a few non-native, scrubby grasses. To call this post-mined land a “moonscape,” as many do, is an insult to the moon.

Brian was quiet as we walked, and then he asked, “When are they going to reclaim this land?”

“It has been reclaimed,” I said. “They sprayed hydro-seed, so now this qualifies as wildlife habitat.”

“This is it?”

“This is all the law requires.”

Brian went quiet again, until finally he said, “This is awful.”

Then he asked, “What do you think would happen if every University of Kentucky student came to see this?”

I pulled the old teacher trick and turned the question back on him: “What do *you* think would happen?”

Brian paused, and then said, “I think mountaintop removal would end.”

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