

Equity and Democracy in Education

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A Take on the Course

Words like *equity* and *democracy* evoke our most fervent hopes for education, prompting us to imagine how schools, just possibly, might be in the best of worlds. Before we follow through on our *equity* and *democracy* impulses, with the luxury of a year in STEP, we get to tune our ideas about practices and responsibilities to the real-life complexities of teaching and learning. With *equity* and *democracy* in mind, the goal of this course is to encourage a growth in our understanding and appreciation of this complexity – and not simply the complexity of the classroom, but the terrifically complex relationship between classroom life and the rest of the world.

We strive for responsible descriptions of what is really going on in *real schools* with *real people* in them. This means that we have to interrogate our conventional understandings, including the conventional concepts we use to think and talk about school. We proceed as if we should revise our personal dictionary of terms for kids, learning, community, intelligence, and so on, as part of our work for equity and democracy. Perhaps we need to figure out an altogether new vocabulary if we are to get our way.

Of course, we are neither the first nor the only people to take on such a project. In this course, we use the work that others have already done to help us think, talk, and act collectively in more responsible ways. Rather than direct our readings and discussion exclusively toward the search for immediate “best practices,” – always as unsatisfying as they are simplistic — we will work with each other to identify ideas that are useful and/or problematic in some long run: for next month, yes, but for ten years from now as well.

Overall, the course ought to be good, hard fun.

A More Aggressive Take on the Course

Put out a nice meal, and people will know what to do with it. Different people in different ways for different versions of a meal, of course, but the regularities are visible enough that it is always possible, with careful attention, to pick up and carry out how the members of some group expect people to proceed. It is a matter of manners.

The same for educational problems. Throw a topic on the table – say, tracking, level playing fields, bell curves, abilities and disabilities, race and class, caring and fairness (the latter two both pitted against reality) – and people will go at them with great regularity. Each problem will be taken seriously, opposing sides will get defined, policies and reforms urged, and moral fibers questioned and asserted. And at the end of the day, the year, and even the generation, if all goes well, the changes will have been subtle (not unimportant, but subtle: from meat, milk, and Wonder Bread to watch your carbs!), and the overall production and distribution of cultural and economic resources (whether for the dinner table or for schools) may look

terribly like they always had. As teachers, our victories will be small, local, and, to that extent, heroically important.

Our course is designed to contribute to the subtle changes by interfering with our – yes, our – knee-jerk responses to the ways educational problems are usually defined. Our three main goals are perhaps in the opposite order than you might expect.

Our first goal is to transform the discussion of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and, surprise, ability and cognitive capacity differences here, right here on the third floor of CERAS. We have eight days. We cannot solve the problems of the world in eight days, or eight years. This is not an excuse to stop trying. We will try to do it all, but we will not be deterred by those who would use our inability to supply a magic bullet to write off thinking hard about where we stand. Back off! The magic bullet thing ain't happening. But we can get the conversation started, and, if we are good, if we really struggle to say what is on our minds, or stuck in the back of our minds, we just might begin to develop an occasional new place to stand in relation to the educational fare usually thrown our way. As a people, it took us decades to figure out that Wonder Bread is awful; and so we might do the same for its educational equivalent, say: the SATs (cookie-cutter questions, with little sustenance or taste). If you leave this course and do not talk politics for the rest of the year, we will have failed terribly. If you leave the course with the knowledge that anything and every can and will be talked about, we will have succeeded.

Our second goal is directed to how you think about the problems that develop right in front of your face in your own classrooms filled with children. What are you going to do with the first child you don't like, or want to give up on, or find one hundred reasons to forget? You will not be alone in these problems. They happen everywhere called educative in American society. There is a way they are the problems of the children you are asked to save and nurture. There is a way they are your problem, and there is way they belong to all of us. How are you going to worry about them? If you leave this course with a different way – any second way, please – of thinking and talking about and responding to our own engagement and even investment in the production of the very troubles we are trying to solve, we will have together made a contribution to subtle change.

The third effort for change, our third goal, is to worry about these problems at the level of classroom practice. Ultimately, this is our most important goal, but ultimately can take a long time. We are hoping for ten more months.

Assignments

1. You will do all the reading (there is that much) and come to class ready to talk, argue, and question. Please don't be easy with us. If you are going to make change, you are going to have to be tough. Might as well get some practice shots.
2. You will write a small reaction papers to TWO of the assigned readings. You may or may not, depending on the section, be asked to run a discussion of a reading of your choice.
3. The final assignment is directed to your recent summer teaching experiences to deepen and extend your emerging conversations about equity, democracy, and schooling

Adjustments

We want to leave room for adjustments, particularly ones suggested by you. We can do this in class and/or in our informal lunch meetings that are a great place to say what has to be said.

Schedule

Monday, 3 August:

Read: Tyack (Reader)

H.G. Wells (on Coursework or Google)

There sure is plenty of diversity in the world, and we sure find a surprising number of ways to cut it up conceptually and institutionally. In the United States, we divide by race, gender, sexual orientation, sometimes class (always operative, but not always articulated), and often, without even noticing the problems we cause, brain and cognitive power; in each case, the popular effort is to describe, and blame, the differences on nature, taken one person at a time, right down to their genes. Other cultures do it differently enough to alert us to the arbitrariness of our own ways of proceeding: height, fertility, strength, memory demand, spiritual tendencies, and supposed beauty have all taken their place as a focus for socialization and sorting.

Our problem as teachers is to make visible to ourselves (and others when necessary and advisable) just how we do our dividing and with what consequences. Talking about the problems is never more than a first step, but nothing happens without it. David Tyack's excellent essay (and his subsequent book) shows the many ways diversity has been handled in American history. H.G. Wells gives a hilarious and sad account of how it might work in a make-believe, but recognizable culture.

Tuesday, 4 August:

Read: McDermott (Reader)

Can the concept of culture help us out? Whose culture? And whose concept? And what might culture have to do with learning, particularly with learning as it seems to happen – and not happen – in the head? For some cultural differences, all the way down at the level of school, consider Charles Dickens or James Joyce in our culture not long ago. Wait: Whose culture? And who says? Do the portraits cover EPA, or the Manhattan Country School, or STEP at SUSE? Another place to find culture at work is in the decision to track/not track in the very classrooms you are going to this year and will be fully responsible for next year.

Wednesday, 5 August:

Read: Horton & Freire (Coursework) Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (Plume 1992).

Sure is hard to imagine how to teach to and/or around all those differences. Are they problems or opportunities? Whose problems? Whose opportunities? How many people are involved: in Baudelaire's shortest story, or in our being where we are today? How do Horton and Freire handle it all? Why did they have to work so hard – to the point of jail time – at doing what would seem to just common sense? Their version of common sense is going to be terribly difficult to operate on – it will be uncommon – in the public schools of California? What are out alternatives?

Thursday, 6 August:

Read: Henry (Reader)

Wortham (Coursework)

How deep does the competitive urge go? How much tuition are you willing to pay to get an advantage? What are its downsides? For the kids? For you? Can we teach without it? Are there cultures that do without it? In schools? On what grounds? With what consequences?

Monday, 10 August:

Read: Dewey (Reader)

Dewey 1933 (recommended; on request)

Here it is. In the U.S., if you are not doing Dewey's version in education, Dewey is the thing you are not doing; nothing else quite counts like that, not Piaget, not Vygotsky, not Skinner, not the Department of Education. Only the educational testing services hold as much sway, with the differences that they are much more powerful (because they come complete with a number loaded technology and a promise of selling careers at the top). With that influence come the strange circumstances of Dewey's influence: that few teachers have ever gotten the chance to carry Dewey's formulations to completion, and, despite all the talk, almost no one reads him, not even many of those who cite him in educational research. It is essential that you read him.

Tuesday, 11 August:

Read: Pollock

Lin (both in Reader)

Let's talk about race. That should be easy enough. Except sometimes. If not, why not, how not, where not, and with what price either way? It turns out to be a rare event, and carefully controlled. And if everyone were talking about race, what would they not be talking about? Can anyone talk about race and class at the same time without falling into a foolish competition?

Wednesday, 12 August:

Read: Lave (Coursework)

McDermott & Raley (both in Reader)

No theory, no practice. Even dumb practice is driven by a theory, likely a lousy one. No practice, no theory. Even dumb theory is driven by a practice, likely a lousy one. Without a theory and practice split, there would be no way, at least not in a self-proclaimed democracy, to maintain a sophisticated replication of injustices and inequalities. Without a theory and practice split, there would be no way for school people and researchers (also people, of a kind, although not always kind) to not learn from each other and to leave the vast darkness of the teaching and learning business so thoroughly unobscured.

Thursday, 13 August:

Places, neighborhoods, trees, and rocks: just about anything can be used to divide the human terrain and our access to knowledge, identity, promise, rationality, guidance, and education (the last, writ large). Where are your kids coming from, where are they going? And the same for you.

Reader (in alphabetical order):

- Dewey, John
1900 *School and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (chapter 2)
- Hallinan, Maureen and Jeannie Oakes
1994 Tracking. *Sociology of Education*, 67(2): 79-91.
- Henry, Jules
1963 Golden rule days: American schoolrooms. In Jules Henry, *Culture against Man* (pp. 283-321). New York: Vintage Books.
- Lin, Linda
2007 (Mis)-education into American racism. *Teachers College Record*, 107(7), 1725-1746.
- McDermott, Ray
2008 The concept of culture in education. Ms.
- Pollock, Mica
2004 *Color Mute (pp. 1-17)*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Available on Coursework (in alphabetical order):

- Horton, Myles and Friere, Paulo
1992 *We Make the Road by Walking*. (selected pages)
- Lave, Jean
1996 Teaching, as learning, in practice. *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 3: 149-164.
- McDermott, Ray, Shelley Goldman, and Hervé Varenne
2006 The cultural work of LD. *Educational Researcher* 35(6): 12-17.
- Tyack, David
1993 Constructing difference: Historical reflections on schooling and social diversity. *Teachers College Record*, 95, 8-34.
- Wells, H.G.
1904 The country of the blind (use Coursework or Google).
- Wortham, Stanton
2003 Curriculum as a resource for the development of social identity. *Sociology of Education* 78: 248-276.

On request

- Dewey, John
1933 The social-economic situation and education. In Wm. Kirkpatrick, et.al., *The Education Frontier* (pp. 32-72). D. Appleton-Century.