

# An Ethic of Engagement: Qualitative Learning in the 21st Century

by  
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At the Bronx School Leadership Teams regional meeting in early 2008, the presenters spoke of student learning levels as “hard sales data.” This statement was striking as an inadvertent exposure of the popular culture that has turned constructive learners into consuming and consumable objects, of the business of education that has bankrupted so many students. Out of all the data analysis, one finding remains particularly clear: Attempting to analyze students as comparative, quantified samples neither affirms self-efficacy nor teaches students to work for quality.

The language of market analysis has increasingly dominated discourses of educational program design (Meier, 2008; Richman, 2000), a trend that is located at the center of a larger debate around the privatization of public schools (Hill & Kumar, 2008; Ichilov, 2008; Noguera, 1998 ). The current economic downturn has energized this critical dialogue, analyzing the threat of unregulated capitalism to the stability of democratic institutions. Shortly after assuming his role as Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan spoke about the ramifications of the current fiscal downturn: “The fact is that we are not just in an economic crisis; we are in an educational crisis. We have to educate ourselves to a better economy” (as cited in Ramirez & Clark, 2009, ¶1). Yet even as the failures of market forces resonate in every sector, there has been little public policy action to promote curricula that foster the critical skills necessary to understand this decline and prepare for future

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developments. Current economic and social crises call for models that work productively with 21st century youth, incorporating teaching and learning practices that empower students as current and emergent community leaders who can effectively navigate domestic and global affairs.

If, of late, schools seem to have lost their sense of purpose, it is to a great degree because students are not consulted in the design of their education. Too often young people are but a peripheral concern, when, in fact, success in schools is dependent upon supporting learners and educators. The underwhelming lack of emphasis on the productive capacities of youth is a consequence of a general lack of emphasis on critical understanding in the United States (Chomsky & Macedo, 2004; Jacoby, 2008). While this crisis of critical learning predates our current economic slump, the moment illuminates the space for a reconsideration of educational priorities.

The more that American public education is defined by industrial interests, the less it will engage with the crucial work of humanizing youth into educated citizens. Market-based policies tend to stifle learning, forgoing a consideration of the development needs and abilities of learners. The greatest danger in this model is that students will remain disembodied business quotas that can be valued in terms of risk and reward. Moreover, the trends of the global economy suggest that the replication of the American education system in capitalist cultures throughout the world—emulating the spread of American consumer culture in late 20th century globalization—could effectively disempower students worldwide in the interest of profit over scholarship (Mott, 2004; Ritzer, 2004).

One way to directly counteract this devaluation is for educators to create classroom communities that serve as vibrant centers for active pursuits in learning, where students can experience opportunities for engaged explorations in and reflections of their current and historical contexts. For this to happen, educators, administrators, and youth organizers alike must establish connections to the lived realities of young people to prepare them for their future. The skills needed to succeed in the globalized present—multicultural competences and facility with information technology—are not represented in formal assessments, thus leaving students far behind in crucial developmental growth. Pink (2006) outlined the challenges that lie ahead for the American workforce: “We must perform work that overseas knowledge workers can’t do cheaper, that computers can’t do faster, and that satisfies the aesthetic, emotional, and spiritual demands of a prosperous time” (p. 61). In exactly this moment when the prospects of prosperity are perilously indeterminate, it is essential to reexamine American educational values.

In a recent interview with Henry Giroux, Polychroniou (2008) posed a vital question: “What can school administrators and teachers do to construct a learning environment that is geared to self-development, respect for others and responsibility for one’s actions, and form social bonds around the value of democracy, freedom and civic virtue” (§12)? What follows is an attempt to answer that question, suggesting a committed reconsideration of how learning occurs. Through an

analysis of student motivation and critical pedagogy in the context of the world outside the classroom, this paper offers a conceptual framework for education focused on the value of achievement.

## Developing Critical Inquiry through Media Literacy and Interdisciplinary Study

In his seminal media text, McLuhan (1967) illuminated a central tension within education:

There is a world of difference between the modern home environment of integrated electric information and the classroom. Today's television child is attuned to up-to-the-minute "adult" news—inflation, rioting, war, taxes, crime, bathing beauties—and is bewildered when he enters the nineteenth-century environment that still characterizes the educational establishment where information is scarce but ordered and structured by fragmented, classified patterns, subjects, and schedules... Today's child is growing up absurd, because he lives in two worlds, and neither of them inclines him to grow up. Growing up – that is our new work, and it is total. Mere instruction will not suffice. (p.18)

Although published more than 40 years ago, McLuhan predicted the rise of the global digital world that now contextualizes the learning environment. Adolescents today are immersed in multi-mediated, interactive culture and would be well served to work with various media to explore themselves in this contemporary context. If education is to prepare learners for life beyond the classroom, schools must be organized to engage the trends of information economies that, as Freire (2004) wrote, "are faithful to historic and material circumstances and to the levels of technological scientific development of their context" (p. 32). Today's students, captive as they are in a highly technical culture of mass-marketed social identities where values are sold as novelty products, require an education committed to media literacy across the curriculum. Yet, despite its widespread significance within commercial enterprises and higher education, media literacy continues to receive little attention in school curricula. The result of such disregard is that young people are trained to subsist merely as quiescent consumers of information.

To a great extent, the interaction of the private sector in public education has produced the effect of perpetuating such torpidity in contradiction to the stimulating currents of modernity (Meier, 2008; Noguera, 1998). The contemporary moment has illustrated that an overemphasis on formalized testing encourages the passive reception of content, not the mobility that comes from activated inquiry. The central concern here, as Nalder (1999) noted, is a "cultural imperialism" that does not focus on the importance of immediate or personalized communication, but instead chooses to instill a "synthetic rationality" that overlooks creativity and intuition in favor of information storage and retrieval (p. 7). Conditioning learners in this way, dedicated to mechanized regurgitation rather than the demonstration

of understanding, obstructs the development of analytical sophistication and creative problem solving so necessary to prepare for future success.

This has occurred in part, as Giroux suggested, because there are forces at work “that are waging a battle to eliminate any vestige of critical education from the classroom on the grounds that such teaching is either propagandistic or unpatriotic” (Polychroniou, 2008, ¶11). What has been overlooked in the “depoliticized” pragmatics of much current educational policy is the potency of critical learning, which leads students towards awareness and ingenuity rather than mere consumption. Instead, today’s curricular mandates assess learner conditioning and rote memory, not the skills that promote comprehension, interrogation, and argument (Beyer & Apple, 1998; Sappier, 1996). In a recent article, Vickery (2008) expanded upon McLuhan and Freire’s media critiques, arguing that this challenge exists in part because today’s “popular culture rewards deference to economic power and technology and disdains inquiry and dissent” (p. 10). But economic and social realities do not require fatalistic determinations; rather, they demand a reconsideration of ideological and material conditions, to redress disparities and envision innovation.

Innovation, it cannot hurt to reiterate, is defined by creative conception. Creative teaching and learning strategies allow for insight into self in society and support key cultural understandings (Sharp & Le Métais, 2000). While it is not always easy to incorporate creative productivity in classrooms, education policy-makers have essentially cut off young people from popular culture by limiting expression and inhibiting creativity such that “what we may have gained in academic respectability we may have lost in artistic authenticity” (Burton, 1994, p. 481). For many students, life outside of school is endlessly engaged in creative explorations of new media, and they must be able to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce information through these various means of communication (Schwarz, 2003).

For students to develop such capacities, educators must be willing to engage youth culture, which includes an acknowledgment that digital space is constituted by interdisciplinary intersections. If youth are to actively engage new media landscapes, they require the ability to both analyze layered discourses of information and articulate informed critique. Inquiry-based practices that incorporate these skills offer a great degree of learning, enhancing understanding through the demonstrated performance of qualitative competencies (Friend, 1990; Shor, 1987). Willingham (2008) recently wrote that the more meaningfully students consider a topic, the more likely they are to internalize the information, and thus, educators should focus on “ways to help them think about meaning and avoid study methods that do not encourage them to think about meaning” (p. 18). Thus one task of educators must be to integrate creative methods of critical inquiry into their curricula. Giroux, quoting Stuart Hall, affirmed the political importance of such comprehension: “There is also the urgent need for educators to provide students with ‘critical knowledge (that is) ahead of traditional knowledge...better than anything that

traditional knowledge can produce, because only serious ideas are going to stand up” (Polychroniou, 2008, ¶17). These combined notions—supporting informed understandings within cultural contexts—must compel educators to create classes that serve as hubs of student-directed, multi-mediated inquiry development.

In this era of high-stakes testing, the parameters of academic standards have remained stagnant despite the move towards greater “accountability.” The question one must then ask, as posed by Renzulli (2001), is “what constitutes authentic and rigorous content within the field or fields of study” (p. 15)? In humanities studies, academic work is entrenched in what Schwarz (2003) called “human activities, characterized by ongoing argument, new ideas, struggle, and new forms—not dead matter to be memorized for tests” (p. 49). While there are various standardized methods for the assessment of student performance, there is much that goes along with understanding the cultural context of histories, works of literature and art. The large themes within these subject areas, such as equity, freedom, and justice, assert a reach that is definitively interdisciplinary and, if combined with media literacy, could deepen cultural competencies and enhance character development.

Perhaps it is important at this juncture to acknowledge that “of all the modes of organizing the school day, interdisciplinary and integrated teaching and learning are the most difficult and complex to achieve” (Burton, 1994, p. 486). Curriculum mandates outline a great expanse of disciplinary knowledge, but there are many areas within education—arts, literature, the histories of societies and sciences, technology studies—that would benefit from contextualizing their content through cross-curricular learning. Interdisciplinary coursework can offset the formal partitioning of disciplinary knowledge and can help students to better function within the integrated world. Moreover, there is a need to synthesize the debate that has pitted progressive, student-centered ideas against discipline-based, subject-centered conceptions of education. Rather than lobbying for changes to standards or outcomes, this work would infuse the dynamic social understandings already at work within classrooms, promoting lasting outcomes and an enhanced commitment to learning. In this way, learning environments can become more aligned with the activated contexts in which students live.

## Creating a Community of Motivated Learners

Any such shifts in curriculum and instruction are dually bound by substantial understandings about curricular content, cultural contexts, and youth development. When the next generation enters the workforce, they must be invested with a willingness to serve their communities. For that to happen, they require affirmation now that they, as young people, are valued contributors to a positive future.

American educators are increasingly challenged by students who have come to value knowledge only as a means of career advancement. If their experience in public school does not inspire openness to learning, classrooms can become

volatile. As Giroux stated, “If education is going to be responsive to the larger problems that erupt in its classrooms, it has to become a force for addressing the deepest conflicts of our time” (Polychroniou, 2008, ¶14). To address these conflicts, knowledge must be made meaningful to learners, taking into account their identities, connecting to their cultural understandings, while remaining open to their voices and challenging them to evolve. Giroux underscored this last point:

Pedagogy in this instance takes matters of context seriously, but does not limit its articulation of knowledge to the immediacy of experience; rather, experiential contexts become a starting point for moving into the larger world of knowledge, ideas, theories and social relations. (Polychroniou, 2008, ¶14)

It is essential to understand what happens inside of classrooms to evaluate how learning is achieved and what value students place on knowledge. If indeed some fundamental learning occurs through acts of creative production, such learning must not only focus on acts of inquiry, but must also “radiate back and forth informing and accommodating to insights and sensibilities derived from historical, cultural, aesthetic, critical, social, and all manner of other sources” (Burton, 1994, p. 482). This can only happen in a classroom context where educators understand the enduring needs of all learners, with an aim at developing cognitive, emotional, and cultural competencies. Such an environment allows students to bring their lived experiences to school in order to work through their understandings. Pedro Noguera (2007) delineated the task of educators in this pursuit to have “an openness to hearing young people share their perceptions of the social reality they inhabit, and a willingness to engage in acts of solidarity in the fight against the oppression they face” (¶ 33). For students to experience success, they must learn about the power of their autonomy and begin to establish boundaries that support the growth of the whole class. If educators are to guide students towards substantive achievement, they must first attend to this social responsibility, facilitating student-centered dialogues inside their classrooms that move beyond simple academic exercises.

The first published paper from the Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing, “An Emerging Model for Working with Youth,” outlined a common set of developmental outcomes that respect “the intelligence, leadership, abilities, and passions of young people” (Listen, 2003, p. 2). These outcomes, which include positive identity, increased knowledge skills, and a deeper commitment to community, require flexibility if they are to genuinely integrate the specific personal and educational histories that students bring with them. The input of youth and educators alike is key to establishing a space where there is a sense of respect for the dignity of all learners. Only when all classroom members can begin to understand the internal dynamics of the learning environment can they engage with the dialogue that emerges from within.

For many educators, the challenge of simply managing their classrooms is evidence that there is little attempt to understand the experiences of learners (Noguera, 2007). To make education relevant, it is imperative to examine the most

pressing problems that students face. Some of the most successful classrooms and youth organizing groups focus on an inclusive approach to working with students, incorporating discussions of race, class, gender, and other representational realities into the study of literature, art, history and current events (Listen, 2003; Nusbaum, 1997). To create a community of motivated learners, educators must allow for the processing of subjective cognition, interpretation, and expression. This requires a shift away from adults organizing without consulting young people. By moving to a position where educators are working with youth, classrooms can become sites of collaborative growth and equitable educational advancement.

### Allowing for Connection to the World Outside the Classroom

Renzulli (2000) wrote that learning is most effective when students are guided through a series of progressive experiences, exploring a curricular sub-topic that leads to the investigation of real problems and results in projects directed at real world audiences. Through activities and assessments that encourage high levels of involvement, students are able to understand the connection between their learning and expression styles and their role as agents of change within their communities. This investment in the talents of all youth enables students, as Giroux noted, “to deepen their commitments to social justice, equality, and individual and social autonomy,” affirming their duty as learners to participate in the creation of their communities (Polychroniou, 2008, ¶ 3).

This process of collaborative visioning opens the classroom as a space that empowers young people because it is built upon, not limited by, its scholarly enterprise. Such a frame stipulates outcomes that are much more than quantitative results, promoting the active involvement of students in the local, national, and global issues that contextualize their lives. Education that allows for youth to be engaged citizens in this way will reify the democratic principles inside their classrooms while establishing their roles as contributors to their broader communities.

One major barrier to connecting youth to the world outside the classroom is a popular assumption that youth are unruly, apathetic, and disengaged. As Noguera (2007) noted, there is a “larger space in the public imagination and psyche” in which youth are often regarded as “a ‘problem’ and a ‘threat to civil society and the social order and a source of unrest and disorder” (¶ 5). Though they may seem transfixed by social networking, possessed by popular culture, and disconnected by personal technology, young people have the ability to evolve in complex ways within their environments. The commodified culture of passive attitudes and instant gratification has bred youth skeptical of the worth of inquiry, and yet they demonstrate great facility with technology and digitized culture (Arafeh & Levin, 2003; Walsh, 2007). New media has complicated and rearticulated the need for curricula designed to promote the skills necessary to create products with real-world impact. Any popular assumption of youth apathy ignores the pressing need for educators to listen to what students have to say and foster their talents and

interests to support their academic and social growth. The re-conception of young people as catalysts for social change is imperative to the development of citizens who can critically and constructively engage in their communities.

Such learning opportunities are only viable if there is a real connection to the school's internal and external environments. This qualitative work involves the co-construction of learning together with young people, allowing them opportunities to propose projects, rather than merely have content imposed upon them. Such practices can "transform the outlook of marginalized youth from one of desperate resignation to one of critical awareness and pragmatic optimism" (Noguera, 2007, ¶ 18). Such an anti-authoritarian approach negates the damaging effects of industrial rationality, empowering students to be positive contributors to the development of their educational and societal landscapes.

The risk in over-formalizing assessment is that the youth of today are led to believe that they will not have to be innovative and pragmatic in the future. Too often, the only educational environment for students to experience achievement is through compartmentalized examination. Such assessments offer few cues to activate the learner's memory, and consistent underachievement on these tests results in the internalized rejection of their untested abilities. "A better strategy," as Willingham (2008) pointed out, "is for students to have a specific task that will force them to think about meaning," to affirm positive engagement and task-commitment, as students consider "which ideas have been covered and how they relate to one another" (p. 20). Demonstrations of learning, through techniques such as historical excavations and creative presentations of research discoveries, instill in students a stronger dedication to their studies and a fuller sense of self as a contributing voice to larger educational and social conversations. Renzulli (2000) outlined the success in the use of such instructional practices, noting:

Material learned through authentic pursuits has the greatest amount of transfer value for future use. When context and processes are learned in authentic, contextual situations, they result in more meaningful uses of information and problem-solving strategies than the learning that takes place in overly structured, prescribed classroom situations. (p. 8)

Of course, the development of critical knowledge practice does not come quickly to students who have been asked to achieve minimum standardized results. If, instead, students were learning to work through their communicative abilities, distinguishing social codes and judging history with a grasp on current events, they would be better prepared to link their understandings across content areas and outside the limits of the classroom. Any such learning requires education organized to treat students as active participants, in alliance with adults, committed to improving their communities, and not as clients who receive educational service.

For various reasons, the notion of connecting with students' lives outside of the classroom has been considered political (of course, intentionally avoiding this lived context is just as political). As Giroux argued, education, in fact, "is always



political because it is connected to the acquisition of agency (Polychroniou, 2008, ¶ 4).” He goes on to articulate the parameters of this political project:

Education should illuminate the relationships among knowledge, authority and power. It should also draw attention to questions concerning who has control over the production of knowledge, values and skills, and it should illuminate how knowledge, identities and authority are constructed within particular sets of social relations. (Polychroniou, 2008, ¶ 4)

This can only happen if education is intentionally open and interrogative, effectively developing student understanding in a great range of academic, aesthetic, and social factors. Such inquiry can also connect to the expertise of community members whose professional work integrates various traces of traditional disciplines. This requires a consistent effort to connect learning to broad cultural contexts if classrooms are not to remain vacuous. This critical work, and any suggestion of critical pedagogy, must take authentic learning and expressive conceptions out of the classroom and into real community action.

## A Humanizing Pedagogy for Global Citizenry

The collective identity crisis facing students today is as much imposed from a host of external forces as it is constructed and reinforced from within a culture of uninspired learners. While much has been made of quantitative results in American education policy, little focus has been put on the needs of learners to improve achievement. Yet even as stimulating opportunities are continually purged from schools, the effects of such stagnation have not immobilized all young people. If students are to critically evolve as responsible and empathetic characters, educators must act to reintegrate learners, to connect with their tangible landscapes, and to reinforce what they already know.

Incorporating connections to the context of the real world allows for the development of motivated young people, consistently activating the processes of critical inquiry and creative productivity that can help students to evolve beyond the inertia of their conditioned cultures. Such learning can “transform issues that once hobbled their academic and social development—racism, crime, stereotypes, poverty—into opportunities for research, problem solving, and social action” (Sponder, 1993, p. 52).

In the absence of critical pedagogy, various forces of politic and policy will continually attempt “to substitute our concerns about a conceptually challenging and enjoyable learning environment with simplistic solutions such as hosing kids down with vast amounts of factual material in the hope that it will improve test scores” (Renzulli, 2001, pp. 17-18). This lack of concern for learners in the industry of assessment has irrevocably damaged learners and the communities that require their involvement. It is the work of educators, operating within the humanities and throughout the curriculum, to provide learners with the capacities to

expand and develop, to begin to realize themselves in the context of the globalized present.

Most significantly, students must begin to understand that their right to education exists beyond the reaches of testable limitations. What is needed most is a quality of instruction that will guarantee measurable performance results that will endure for students as the experiences of success they take with them into life after school. Systems that do not support teachers in genuinely challenging students will not produce competent and engaged citizens. Amidst ever-expanding automation, outsourcing of jobs, and an economy in crisis, there has never been a more apt time to humanize education. Such critical practices may not be easy, but learners and educators must construct positive learning environments to counteract what Giroux called the “narrative of decline,” (Polychroniou, 2008, ¶ 17) to work to empower students now trying to learn in a model that quantifies achievement. This form of thinking “is exactly the tool that will best serve our students in the future as they encounter new proposals in the years to come that we ourselves cannot imagine” (Van Camp, 2004, p. 37). Without that humanist investment, without a commitment to youth as emergent leaders, the future of public education will be overwhelmed with its own mediocrity.

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