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Professional judgment, authentic  
learning and creative classrooms

Van Fraen



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## **“Not Mining is Not An Option!”** Corporate lessons from the *Mining Matters* curriculum

I recently sat in on a workshop for pre-service teachers at a Faculty of Education in Ontario, facilitated by the Prospectors and Developers Association of Canada (PDAC) *Mining Matters* program. PDAC is a lobbying group for the Canadian mining industry. *Mining Matters* is a non-profit, charitable organization created by PDAC in the mid-1990s to educate students “about mining’s importance to our quality of life,” and help the industry “get its message across ... in competition with a media-savvy environmental movement.” The workshop was a demonstration of *Mining Matters*’ new “Discovering Diamonds” comprehensive curriculum kit, filled with lesson plans, activities, mineral and rock samples, maps and other materials, that uses diamond exploration and extraction in the Canadian North as a pedagogical hook to teach Grade 11 and 12 students earth science concepts. I am an education researcher, who has been concerned by the problems of corporatization of public education. I had been invited by *Mining Matters* to come and see firsthand the work they were doing in Canadian classrooms.

The most striking thing about the three-hour workshop was not the “Discovering Diamonds” curriculum itself. The 2006 study on school commercialism, *Who’s Calling the Shots?* (CCPA,

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CTF, FSE), found that corporatization in Canadian schools ranges from blatantly manipulative and commercial materials to curriculum that is “crafted to work with and alongside the school,” “slip in under the radar,” “be justified with the ‘good outweighing the bad,’” or “even be considered part of the new corporate social responsibility approach.” While *Mining Matters* is certainly capable of being manipulative and commercial (take a look at the Junior Miner of Ontario contest on the PDAC website), “Discovering Diamonds” is an example of a more subtle approach to sponsored classroom curriculum. Indeed, in a post-workshop interview, the *Mining Matters* instructor herself said that, as a mother, she would object to her child’s school being plastered with corporate logos and advertisements. “Discovering Diamonds”, as with other *Mining Matters*’ curriculum packages, is not about selling individual products or companies, but an entire industry: one of its primary goals is that students come away with a positive image of an industry that has for decades been the centre of intense conflict and controversy over its environmental, labour and human rights violations and abuses. “Discovering Diamonds” is by no means a one-dimensional piece of industry propaganda either. Rather, it combines a creative and engaging set of hands-on, data-based, problem-solving activities for teaching a wide range of earth science concepts, on the one hand, with a sustained commitment to representing the mining industry in the most positive light possible — as a pillar of social responsibility and paragon of virtue — on the other.

The most striking thing about the *Mining Matters* workshop I observed, however, occurred at the workshop’s conclusion, when the instructor opened up the floor for questions. One by one, the teachers in training — who, for the last few hours, had been fully cooperative and often highly enthusiastic participants in the workshop demonstrations — voiced their concerns about the mining industry. One student had recently seen a flyer on campus for a conference put on by labour, community, indigenous and environmentalist critics of the global role played by the Canadian mining industry, and asked if *Mining Matters* curriculum addressed social and ethical issues of mining — which had not been discussed. A second asked whether the environmental commitments mining companies make are just to look good on paper and “cover their butts.” A third wanted to know if there were watchdog groups that kept an eye on what mining compa-

nies were actually doing. A fourth student asked about problems of water pollution at Canada's diamond mines. And a fifth wanted to know what happens to local communities when mines eventually shut down. These issues had not been raised by the hosting professor, who described the *Mining Matters* curriculum and workshop to both students and myself in glowing terms.

In responding to each of these questions, the *Mining Matters* instructor sought to deflect student concerns, by assuring them the mining industry was committed to environmental and social well-being. In response to the question about local communities, for example, the instructor explained that mining companies always negotiate "impact and benefit agreements" — even, she noted, when the "local" community involved may actually be hundreds of kilometers away. When a sixth student said she knew of communities in the North suffering from dislocation, out-migration and poverty after their mine closed down, the instructor suggested that such communities can be excellent locations for Canadians to buy property cheaply for a second holiday home in the country. She also told students of a recent mining industry conference, where companies discussed relocating entire cities of a hundred thousand people, so that they can mine under the homes where people had lived previously. Finally, the instructor wrapped up the question period by telling students their questions had all focused on the "environmental side" while neglecting the "social benefit side" of mining. Natural resources are essential in a consumer society: "we can't not have minerals, and therefore, the key question should be how to mine responsibly."

In a subsequent interview, the instructor told me she often faces such questions from social science teachers (this particular group were training to be geography teachers), who tend to be "quite naïve," in contrast to science student teachers, who are much more concerned with technical issues that constitute the core of the *Mining Matters* curriculum. Channelling student and teacher questioning and curiosity is a primary concern for

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developers of the *Mining Matters* curriculum. In earlier versions of the “Discovering Diamonds” curriculum, the instructor explains, one unit asked students to construct a mini-landscape out of sand, gravel and model trees and animals in a tupperware container. They then had to decide between different options for how to dig a mine and close up the mine, with a concern for cost,

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efficiency and ecological preservation. The problem arose that students and teachers kept on deciding not to mine the landscapes they had created in the first place. *Mining Matters*, therefore, now pre-constructs the landscapes so that students aren't as invested in them, and insists they have to build a mine. In our world, the *Mining Matters* instructor tells them, “not mining is not an option!”

Programs such as *Mining Matters* have serious consequences for the public treatment of the mining industry in Canada — which, in recent years, has been the focus of demonstrations, marches, hunger strikes, community protests, international censure, and growing demands for improved state regulation and the imposition of mandatory environmental and human rights standards. The standard mining industry response, promoted by *Mining Matters*, that the industry is “good” because it provides minerals that we all need and use, is misleading and beside the point. The equivalent would be the financial industry telling us, when we criticize their practices that have led us to global economic meltdown, that they are “good” because we need and use the financial products they provide. The key issue is addressing and reforming industry malpractice, and asking who is benefiting and who is being harmed by current extractive processes. “We” may “need” minerals, but “they” may suffer for our demand. Contrary to the claims of *Mining Matters*, not mining is *always* an option. There are often very good reasons for leaving minerals in the ground. Indeed, the key principle of free prior informed community consent, endorsed by the World Bank's (2003) “Extractive Industries Review” (and by environmentalist, community and indigenous organizations) is meaningful if and only if not mining is embraced as a legitimate local development option.

Programs such as *Mining Matters* also illustrate problems with the corporatization of public education in general. Here, I highlight three points:

(1) The critical literature on school commercialism tends to focus on in-school advertising more than sponsored curriculum, the selling of brand-name commodities more than the selling of corporate ideologies, and the direct presence of for-profit corporations more than the intermediary work often done by non-profit (but corporate funded) foundations, think tanks and institutes. Moreover, when corporate-sponsored curriculum materials are talked about, there is a tendency to present these as stupid, mindless and devoid of pedagogical value. Corporate curriculum, says one critic, promotes an “undiscriminating gulping mental habit in students,” instead of the “discriminating intelligence” that public schools should be promoting. *Mining Matters* curriculum may be many things, but it is not stupid. Rather, it is smart, creative, and often challenging: it is also driven by a very specific industry agenda.

(2) The literature on school commercialism tells a story of decreasing public funding for education providing an opening for corporate funded curriculum to come into schools instead. *Mining Matters*, it is true, has received hundreds of thousands of dollars over the years from PDAC, as well as mining corporations such as Barrick Gold, Teck Cominco, Placer Dome, Inco, Noranda, Falconbridge and De Beers Canada. But it is also funded and supported directly by the Ontario government — through the Ministries of Northern Development and Mines; Economic Development and Trade; Energy, Science and Technology; and Research and Innovation — as well as the federal government — through the National Sciences and Engineering Research Council. In other words, the state itself is an active and vigorous promoter of school-business partnerships such as *Mining Matters*. Indeed, arguably the most propagandistic materials in the *Mining Matters* curriculum are not produced by *Mining*

*Matters* developers, but are information booklets created by the Ontario Ministry of Northern Development and Mines to promote the Canadian mining industry. In the recently revised Ontario science curriculum for Grades 1-8, the government (with advice from *Mining Matters*) actually warns teachers against being too critical of the mining sector in their classrooms, or taking too strong an environmentalist framework, and demands that they highlight the perspectives of mining companies as well as the benefits of mining products for a consumerist society. (The text reads: “Because rocks and minerals are such an integral part of our lives, it may be hard for students in Grade 4 to see the issues clearly. It would be very easy for their viewpoint to be skewed as they come to realize the impacts associated with just one person’s yearly use of these natural resources.... Therefore, it is critical that they be given opportunities to look at these issues from the standpoint of all stakeholders: mining companies, communities where the mines are located, manufacturers, those who are dependent on the natural environment, and people who benefit from the use of the products — the students and their families.”)

(3) If students, parents or teachers have concerns about the perspectives being promoted by the *Mining Matters* curriculum, it is not obvious where to find independent sources of information, opinion and critical analysis that are committed to the service of the broader public good, not private, corporate-driven interests. It is not just the state that supports *Mining Matters*. Universities have close ties with the program, and not solely through giving *Mining Matters* space to present their curriculum to pre-service teachers in training. For a number of years, *Mining Matters* was housed at the Lassonde Mineral Engineering Program at the University of Toronto, where its director was temporarily a member of the faculty (on secondment from PDAC). The Lassonde Program is itself almost entirely a creation of, by and for industry, having been created in the 1990s through extensive mining industry donations. Professional organizations of earth

scientists likewise work collaboratively with *Mining Matters* in their efforts to promote earth science education at the elementary and secondary levels. Indeed, EdGEO, the Canadian Federation of Earth Sciences body for supporting training workshops on earth science for Canadian teachers, is directed by the same individuals who run *Mining Matters*. “Public” institutions of science such as the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) and the Ontario Science Centre are also *Mining Matters* partners. The ROM, furthermore, receives corporate funding directly from mining corporations such as Teck Cominco and De Beers Canada to promote an industry-driven message very similar to the one promoted by *Mining Matters* in Canadian public schools.

We should not think of corporate curriculum programs such as *Mining Matters* as individual “bad apples” that we can simply seek to keep out of public school classrooms. If we do, then we miss the forest for the trees. *Mining Matters* and other curriculum programs like it are products of a corporate-driven, market-based, neoliberal system in which private, business interests have been granted hegemony over broader, public ones. Profit-driven corporations, when given the chance, will seek to promote ideologies and agendas that benefit their own bottom line, whenever and wherever they can — in our universities, schools, professional bodies, museums, science centres and government ministries. As in the parable of the scorpion who stings and kills the frog that is ferrying it across the river, this is simply what they do: it is their nature. Paying close attention to programs such as *Mining Matters* will always be important, for it is here that problems of corporatization tend to be most easily seen. But critical response needs to move swiftly to a broader level of reasserting the need for a clear distinction and separation of private and corporate from public interests, and insisting on the value and importance of embracing public over corporate leadership in the setting of our collective educational, social, political, economic and environmental agendas.

This brings me back to the role of the *Mining Matters* instructor in the teacher workshop I observed. If the instructor’s articulation of mining industry positions in handling student ques-



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tions was striking, so too were the comments she made to me in a personal interview moments later. The instructor was adamant that she had little connection with the corporate interests of the Canadian mining sector. Rather, she viewed herself as a passionate and committed promoter of basic earth science education in Canadian public schools (and indeed, she impressed me as being a highly skilled earth science educator). The instructor was trained as a teacher and as an earth scientist, and had spent years in the classroom and in graduate study. It is not possible to discern an individual's core (as opposed to publicly presented) beliefs and motivations in a single interview. But all of us live, work and breathe in a corporate-dominated environment. Most of us are forced to find employment directly in corporations, or in public or third sectors that are often dominated by corporate interests. We learn that the way to survive and get ahead is to accept and embrace corporate points of view. Some of us are true believers in this system; but many of us find that, despite our best intentions, we simply come to accept as normal corporate-driven interests and ideologies that are not actually core to our own individual identity or practice. John Ralston Saul has suggested that, "with the best will in the world and for all the right reasons, extremely good professional people (principals, teachers, parents, parent organizations) find themselves drawn, step by step, into unconsciously collaborating in the privatization of the public system." I would hope that, were we to be able to build a real movement to effectively challenge the corporatization of schools and society, then many of these people would be among those individuals whose skills and passions we could draw upon to create a publicly-grounded education system that would truly benefit us all.

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