



CLARA MORGAN

Reflections on Schooling

Thought pieces from Carleton University students enrolled in theory and practice of interdisciplinary education

In winter 2011, I taught a seminar course at Carleton University's Institute of Interdisciplinary Studies that provided students with an inter disciplinary understanding of the educational field while developing a critical perspective on educational issues. What I found intriguing was the ways in which the students interpreted and reflected on the course readings. I believe their personal reflections and their insightful analyses will provide readers with a deeper understanding of the schooling experience from a student's perspective. Their enduring hope for creating a better educational system is truly refreshing.

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KAYLEIGH THOMPSON

Kayleigh Thompson analyzes her high school experiences through the theoretical frameworks offered by bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* and R. Kirk Fallis and Susan Opotow's 'Are Students Failing School or Are Schools Failing Students? Class Cutting in High School.' Even though Kayleigh

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

was initially harmed by the impersonal nature of her schooling experience, her creativity was nurtured by the teacher who taught her ‘Writer’s Craft’. Based on her personal experiences, Kayleigh recommends that we move towards democratizing our classrooms and schools so that students “critique their education and offer suggestions regarding the type of education they want to acquire; one that will engage them as the individuals they are.”

EXCERPT

Up until I started high school I was always a very attentive student; eager to learn, and full of ideas. I was happy and active. My parents would proudly announce to friends and family that I was the star student of my siblings. A drastic shift took place upon entering high school. My marks plummeted; needless to say I was no longer an honour roll student. I no longer enjoyed my classes or my teachers. I was too shy to express myself in classes, or to speak my mind in front of the many new faces of my high school classrooms. I believed I was stupid, and therefore everything I wanted to say would seem so as well. A year in I had full-blown anxiety, and I had fallen into a deep depression. I stopped showing up to classes, I dropped out of courses, and I slept in through most mornings. School was the last place I wanted to be, and when I was there, I constantly thought of being somewhere else.

During grade 11 I entered a writer’s craft course. I engaged in creative writing on my own time, and so I was taken aback by the idea of writing creatively for a grade. I showed up to every class and applied myself. I bonded with my teacher who shared my love for poetry and hauntingly romantic creative writing. Our final project for the class was writing a 15-page story about whatever we wanted. I had been working on a story before I started the course, and so when I finished it I was eager to present it to the class. Coming from someone with a disabling social anxiety this was a strange feeling. I had never hoped to speak in front of a large audience; in fact I avoided it at any cost. But in this class, not only did I believe in my abilities, I also recognized that everyone had a mutual respect for one another. We all really enjoyed being there. After I presented a chosen section of my story I looked up to find the class gasping, and some of the girls were tearing up as well. At that moment I felt recognised for who I was, and for what I poured my heart and soul into. To have such a major part of my identity out in the open made me feel completely bare and vulnerable, but instead of boiling over with anxiety, I felt joy for being understood and well-received.

I wish I could say that high school was different from here on in, but after the class ended and a new term began, with new teachers and new classmates; things went back to normal. Once again, I loathed being in my classes, and being within the school's brick walls.

... Fallis and Opatow coin the term structural violence, which is defined as a "gradual chronic harm that occurs because of the way things are done, whose voice is heard or ignored, and who gets resources or goes without " (pg. 114). The school institution regards some students as irrelevant by ignoring their voices and overlooking their needs (pg. 114). ... As I struggled through the high school system I never entertained the idea that my learning issues could be the result of structural violence. This idea of personal responsibility and discipline was powerful in me; so powerful that I blamed myself for each academic hiccup. Each time I struggled through another assignment, or failed to follow the stream of information in one of my classes; I interpreted this as a result of my own lack of academic ability. I think this is very common for many students in educational institutions. A student is constantly regarded as failing at school, and it is rarely suggested that the school system has failed their students.

... Allowing students the opportunity to partake in how their classes are taught and what material they learn may seem somewhat unreasonable or unattainable, but before we consider how this can or cannot be achieved it is important to understand what is flawed in current teaching methods. For instance, I remember learning in my high school classrooms as being very impersonal. My individual presence went unnoticed quite often. Recognizing everyone in the classroom, and realizing that their presence affects the "classroom dynamic" is something that bell hooks considers of utter importance (pg. 8). This sense of community and collaboration is something that often gets lost in a classroom setting.

... Something that set my writer's craft class apart from the rest of my classes was the style of teaching and the classroom dynamic. I recall the class being hands on, in the sense that we would still learn new ideas, but rather we were encouraged to apply them and shape them in our own individual ways. We were allowed to explore our creativity, and to share our creative work with the class. My teacher worked hard to form bonds with his students, and to get to know us as individuals; not simply as students. In other words, there was an emphasis on care; as well as a sense of community, and collaboration that I will not soon forget.

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES



JENNIFER ALEXANDER-MEZGER

Jennifer Alexander also draws on Fallis and Opatow to help explain the difficulties she encountered in high school. She began to be “mentally absent” from the classroom and to cut classes.

Jennifer recommends that teachers engage students in the classroom, particularly those with different learning styles.

EXCERPT

After grade eight, I moved to public high school that was a five minute walk from our house... I consider myself to this point to have been a pretty good student. My grades were on the high end of average and I was a happy child. I wasn't “popular” in school but had a core group of friends and I was content with that. My sister, who is one year my senior, was concerned about popularity and the transition to high school brought pressure on her to smoke, drink and ‘fit in’ with her peer group. While I quietly made friends where I could, I didn't have the social struggle my sister had. This social struggle began to be reflected in her academic life and she was quickly labelled in high school as a student who ‘didn't care’ or ‘didn't want to be taught’ which in turn was reflected in the teacher's attitude toward teaching her.

A year after teaching Catherine, the teachers had another Alexander daughter on their class list and the question I was always asked during attendance on the first day was, “Oh, are you Catherine's sister?” I would answer yes which was followed with a frown and “Oh...I see.” The first day of school and I already was the owner of a label: “Sister of an underachiever”, and with this label came lowered expectations and an attitude from the teacher. I was rarely acknowledged in class when I had a question which made the material that much harder to understand. My questions were met with scepticism, as though I was asking the question to prove a point or be argumentative rather than trying to expand my knowledge. I found my grades slipping and my desire to sit in class lowering as well. I had the same English teacher for all five years I spent in high school and I always managed to scrape up a 51% to get the course credit. I was never given the opportunity to shine and, because I was in the same teacher's class each year, I never had the opportunity to be exposed to any other teaching style or to a teacher who didn't have a preconceived notion about my abilities. This experience was what led me to ‘cut’ my first class. Although mentally I had ‘cut’ English class every day for all of grade nine, it was halfway through grade 10 that I physically stopped show-

ing up for English class one or two days of the week. No one ever questioned me about it; I think the teacher probably figured ...I was one less student in a crowded class for him to have to deal with. Unfortunately, cutting class caused me to lose what little exposure I was getting to the material which made the homework and tests harder to stay on top of and complete. It was a downward spiral that I didn't see a way to control or get out of.

... Fallis & Opatow (2003) describe cutting class as "a slippery slope; once begun, the academic damage it does is difficult to reverse" (p. 104). I completely agree with this statement and wonder why there wouldn't be some sort of system in place to help students who get off track with their education to get caught up. Teachers are busy and cannot physically keep track of every student; however there must be a way of engaging students to care about themselves and those around them. Perhaps a peer based buddy system could be developed where a student is accountable to more than just themselves. With technology as advanced as it is, there should be Facebook groups for high school classes where students can check in and support or receive support from one another.

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Three of my students had completed a college program in the field of Early Childhood Education and were now enrolled in the child studies program at the Institute of Interdisciplinary Studies. They were particularly interested in the writings of Nel Noddings, a philosopher of education. Katie Vincent, Mandy Hoogeveen, and Jenna Rego draw on Noddings' book, When School Reform Goes Wrong, to reflect on their experiences.



KATIE VINCENT

Katie found Noddings' description of an interest-based curriculum key to changing the standardized curriculum "to allow teachers the freedom to create their own curriculum and expand on students' learning preferences." Drawing on her experience visiting the Miguel Angel Asturias Academy in Guatemala, Katie underlines the importance of developing in students their "critical thinking about one's environment, government and global citizenship."

EXCERPT

Noddings states, “to find out what students are learning, there must be time for free reading, discussion, projects of short and long duration, opportunities to grapple with problems that may not yield solutions. There must be choice built into the curriculum” (2007). I believe that interest-based curriculum would allow for such opportunities for both teachers and students, and that it would be of interest for educational systems to look into modifying standardized curriculum to allow teachers the freedom to create their own curriculum and expand on student’s preferences in learning.

... While in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala over reading week, I learned something about the community’s culture, social status, and impact of the social problems on the lives of families within the community. Volunteering at the Miguel Angel Asturias Academy, I learned about the role of education within the community and how difficult attaining a proper education is for many children within the area. Many of the children, particularly girls, were often forced to drop out of school to work in order to provide for their families. Even when a child could go to school, public schools would often deny them access because of over-crowding, and private schools are out of reach for many children in the area because of the cost (one month of education within a private school costs about USD \$800; 80% of families make less than \$3 per day).

The Miguel Angel Asturias Academy provides scholarships to children who would otherwise not have the opportunity to attend school. They not only teach children the standardized curriculum established by the government of Guatemala, they link the curriculum to correspond with the students’ realities. For example, when learning about numbers, student are often asked to count how many hours each parent works per day, or to count the number of siblings they have.

... The philosophy of the school is to provide children with the critical thinking skills that would allow them to make a positive impact within their communities. Building on critical thinking, the children were asked to read a story about a very important figure in the Guatemalan community. They were asked to analyze the information, considering that the story was written after the Spaniards had arrived within Guatemala. I listed to the children eventually come to the consensus that the story may not be completely true, because it was told by someone without the knowledge of the culture and history of the community, and who had brought their own biases to the story.

I believe that providing students with the skills to critically analyze is an essential component to learning, and should be adopted by Canadian curriculum. Also, teaching children about their communities and making them socially aware provides them with a better understanding of themselves and the obstacles they and their families face.



MANDY HOOGEVEEN

Mandy draws on Noddings' analysis of standardized testing to make sense of her school experiences. As Mandy describes her experience preparing for the EQAO test — “I feel as if it was a cookie cutter education where my classmates and learned to mimic what was being taught not question what was being presented to us” — and she notes, “I began to believe that following the rules was the only way I could complete all the things I wanted to do in life.”

EXCERPT

My memories of standardized testing are not necessarily positive ones and are not ones that I feel that I learned a lot from. Throughout my school career, there has always been one component that triggered anxiety for me and it was standardized testing. The long hours preparing for the test did not advance genuine achievement and may actually discourage growth intellectual growth (2007, p66). I remember sitting in class preparing for the EQAO test. We began going over different components that would be examined on the test and the atmosphere seemed tense and judgemental. The teacher almost seemed frustrated and anxious to see if their teaching methods would be victorious in the testing environment. I felt that if I was unable to keep up with the class, I would somehow let everyone down and be considered a failure.

These expectations placed on student's shoulders discourages the exploration of the topics being examined. I feel as if it was cookie cutter education where my classmates and I learned to mimic what was being taught, not question what was being presented to us. There was a feeling that we should just know the answers to this question and not have to think about it. This was the feeling that I perceived when sitting in this classroom. With the high expectations, I felt that this test would determine the success of my life.

I remember the anxiety I felt the days leading up to the test. I could not sleep, I was constantly feeling nervous about the outcome and

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

forgot about the genuine interest I had in learning. Although this experience didn't stop my interest in learning, some students may reach a certain level and drop out because of all the negative stress and experiences encountered. The long hours of preparation and the immense amount of pressure placed on students can be an indicator for how a child feels about learning. From this thinking, I began to believe that following the rules was the only way I could complete all the things I wanted to do in life.

... As articulated in Nodding's chapter (2007), standardized testing discourages curiosity and risk taking in intellectual tasks. Similarly, students are paying too much attention to grades which inevitably can have the same impact as high stakes testing (2007, p 67). Even to this day, if I do poorly on an assignment or on a test, I feel as if I let everyone down including myself. This is not a good feeling to have when you truly feel you did your best. It makes me feel as if I am not smart enough to be in this university atmosphere. I blame myself, I do not look further into the idea that I am not good at taking tests or this subject just isn't my strong point. This moves onto the next problem with standardized tests. Some people are just poor test takers (2007, p 67).



JENNA REGO

Jenna, an Early Childhood Educator, finds much of her “education, values and beliefs echoed” in Noddings’ writings. She agrees with Noddings’ analysis of teacher accountability noting that the “there are so many factors contributing to the way the teacher teaches.” She also believes that “when we create a curriculum that holds our students interests at mind, this is truly when students begin to learn and learn how to bring their learning to the outside world.”

EXCERPT

I have a diploma in Early Childhood Education. From the moment we walked into the college to the moment we graduated, we were taught to use the children's interest when designing our classrooms, curricula, and our interactions with the children we work with. It was this concept that taught us as educators that children are more interested in learning if the topic is of interest to them. We are taught that many of the areas that children need to learn can be adapted and taught with the children's interest in mind.

To help us key in on the children's interest we are taught a number of observation skills. We can gather our children's interests and mimic this in the dramatic play area, conduct projects surrounding their interest and teach them everyday skills all with their interest in mind. I believe that this can also be transferred into higher learning at the elementary to high school level. I believe that when we create a curriculum that holds our students interest at mind this is truly when students begin to learn and learn how to bring their learning to the outside world. A quotation that Noddings got from Dewey really sums this up "There must be a choice built into the curriculum, students should be involved in the formation of purposes for their own learning" (2007 p. 44).

... Much of what students retain and find useful is the learning that they conduct outside of the classroom such as school sports, clubs, student-teacher relationships and so much more. This learning is not taught by threats, grades, or high stake testing; it's taught by the positive, supportive attitudes that motivated teachers have. When you put such high stakes on testing, passing and failing you really lose all of the choices involved in learning. A successful teacher sets their students up for success, incorporates choice learning into their classroom, and gets the students involved in their education. When students are active in the choices they make about their education they really learn skills that will stick with them throughout their life span.



CASSANDRA ACKERLAND

Cassandra Ackerland's thought piece focused on Catherine Lugg's, "Sissies, Faggots, Lezzies and Dykes: Gender, Sexual Orientation, and a New Politics of Education?" which analyzed gay rights in the educational system. Cassandra was passionate in her reflections, noting "I was more horrified in learning that what I thought was supposed to be a safe haven for kids was actually a place of daily torture, a place where their basic human rights were violated, and a place for persecution for many adults and children alike."

EXCERPT

I'm not gay, queer or transgendered. And sometimes I think myself very lucky because I do not know if I would have the courage to live as one....After reading Catherine A. Lugg's article, I was physically shaking from fury. I was upset that there were laws in place to pro-

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

tect queers, yet the public schools in particular seemed to find ways to ignore them. I was appalled at the constant changes in marital status and qualifications a teacher had to make in order to keep their job — female teachers in particular. I was angered by the public schools' focus on gender conformities and lack of passing on knowledge of the world from one generation to the next.

I was more horrified in learning that what I thought was supposed to be a safe haven for kids was actually a place of daily torture, a place where their basic human rights were violated, and a place for persecution for many adults and children alike. I had known that queer people had generally not been accepted in society, but I had not realized that they had overcome so many obstacles and so much prejudice to get to where they are today. Just to be accepted.

... I could not stop myself from thinking how bleak the future for these kids seemed. How did they survive? How did they not lose hope? Part of me believes that the Kinsey report might have kept hope alive. It was so controversial for its time, even going so far as to say that "homosexual behaviour was perfectly natural" (Lugg, 107). Unfortunately this realization got lost as the Cold War loomed and phobias grew. Decades later, Queer Legal Theory (QLT) emerged and has since been fighting for queer rights, and even those of heterosexuals. QLT realised that "by making queer students the subjects of special protective services, a state or local school board has still reinforced the notion of queer as deviant. Being deemed by the government as at-risk or essentially troubled hardly grants liberation" (Lugg, 114). The QLT realized that in order to liberate queers, there needed to be laws and policies in place that protected everyone. This is exemplified in the case of Brian Seamons, a non-queer who was tormented because he didn't fit perfectly with gender expectations for what it meant to be "male". Brian's teammates grabbed him "one day after coming out of the shower. They forcibly tied him to a towel rack using adhesive tape. They also taped his genitals. His teammate then brought a girl that Brian had dated once to view the spectacle" (Lugg, 117). Brian told his coach but was told he should act more like a man. Brian tried to sue the school, but his case was dropped on the "equal opportunity" approach — the school had "failed to act when the girls were hazed... ignoring it...[so] there was no constitutional violation" (Lugg, 117). The world needs to be a safe place for everyone and queer people need to be viewed as being "people" and not some strange mutation that needs to be hunted out of fear. This safe space included not being fired from a job for being queer, changing dress codes to allow people to be free to wear what they

felt comfortable wearing and to educate the general population on what it really means to be queer.

I felt a surge of hope reading what the QLT thought needed to be done in order to make schools in particular a safer place. I felt like the QLT was also bringing back the whole purpose of schools — a place where knowledge was passed on and not censored.



ERIK ROYLE

The last thought piece I would like to share with you is written by Erik Royle whose reflections focused on the ethical versus the economic dilemma that is involved in creating a for-profit educational model. Erik's inter disciplinary analysis draws from several authors as well as documentaries he was introduced to during the course of the seminar.

EXCERPT

Looking at the pedagogical field, the for-profit education model exemplifies the economic/ethical divide. Proponents of the system argue that the education system has no place draining the government of precious tax dollars, particularly in the present economic state. On the other hand, the for-profit model denies both the human capital provided by a sound education, as well as the value of critical analysis. Academic integrity and freedom have been foundational concepts in the education industry for centuries. Thus, the ethical and economic perspectives each hold some validity. However, the issue becomes more convoluted when for-profit education becomes optional; the question then changes. No longer is it a question of which one. Rather, can we allow for-profit education driven by economic values to exist, alongside the older model of (semi-) public education. A pure economic perspective suggests that such control of the market by the government is inappropriate. A pure ethical model would argue that the economic perspective infringes on academic freedom by presenting economic priorities. Thus, an interdisciplinary approach is necessary in order to frame the issue without denying the validity of either perspective.

... Antioch College provides a disturbing example of the difficulty to maintain both academic integrity and financial stability. The college was once at the forefront of critical thinking and contentious social analysis. However, the school branched out in order to reach a greater audience and thereby gain greater financial stability, and

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

the initial values were lost in the new branch, which took a less critical approach and began to cater to the economic perspective. This is demonstrated by military exercise performed in the library of the college (Antioch Confidential, Brian Springer, 2008). This exercise denied the college's self determination and showed that economic values trumped ethical constructs such as a self-determination. Given the compromises made, closing the college was perhaps the only way to retain the good academic integrity built over the course of the college's history.

This case demonstrates the validity of the 'slippery slope' argument in this context. Antioch's financial instability led to a compromise of academic values, and finally resulted in the complete disappearance of the school. Equally, this case could be seen to support the validity of the economic argument: the school was not financially effective enough to retain the image and perspective desired, and thus it failed.

Here, we see that there is a presumed correctness to universities changing research and education functions in order to meet the needs of business corporations. It is this presumption that splits the economic and ethical perspectives on this subject. The problem with the presumption that educational institutions should change research and education functions lies in a longstanding history of academic freedom. Throughout the course of pedagogical history, it has been established that educational institutions should be free from priorities that conflict with the ability to study contentious material. The university has become the place where such contentious issues can be dealt with without restraint by political (and other) priorities. Thus, proponents of the economic model propose that this freedom is inappropriate, and that market politics (economic priorities) should determine the content and context of education. Woodhouse notes that there is not just a tension, but a "contradiction... between education's goal... and the market's goal" (*Selling Out*, Woodhouse, 2009). This contradiction is not a simple tension but rather a flat-out conflict of interest. The two goals are against each other. They cannot simply be superimposed upon one another.

... One perspective must be dominant in order for the educational industry to perform a function. There is little economic gain in academic freedom, and little academic gain in free-market education. The concept of academic freedom is a remnant of a past educational context. I propose that this is a valuable remnant that encourages diversity of perspective, which is in fact a great economic value. The

subtle value of diversity is where I propose the two sides may be able to find common ground. However, all sides must agree on a hierarchy of values in order for the educators to implement clear priorities. Societal participants must determine what these priorities are, and which imperatives are greater. Without such distinctions, the education industry is left in turmoil, with no path forward. To move forward, there must be a forward toward which to move. I cannot pretend to speak for all society when I claim that academic integrity is of paramount importance. The collective must reach this decision through each individual's perspective on the subject.

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Kayleigh Thompson is designing an Interdisciplinary degree at Carleton university. She is interested in the various issues and debates regarding education, particularly in terms of creativity, culture and gender.

Jennifer Alexander-Mezger is an Early Childhood Educator who recently graduated from Carleton University with a BA in Child Studies and is currently enrolled in the Teacher's Education program at University of Ottawa. She lives in Ottawa with her husband and two sons.

Katie Vincent has studied at Algonquin College and Carleton University, concentrating on child development and global and early childhood education. She is currently completing her Bachelor of Education degree at the University of Ottawa.

Mandy Hoogveen graduated from Carleton University's Institute of Interdisciplinary Studies with a degree in Child Studies and is currently pursuing a degree in teaching at Queen's University.

Jenna Rego completed her diploma in Early Childhood Education from Algonquin College and is undertaking a BA in Child Studies at Carleton University.

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

Cassandra Ackerland studied Psychology and Linguistics at Carleton University (2011). In her spare time, she volunteers with Planned Parenthood Ottawa as well as within elementary schools.

Erik Royle is a graduate of the Interdisciplinary Studies program at Carleton University, with studies focusing on the philosophy of the culinary arts. A background in Waldorf education informs many aspects of Erik's pedagogical approach.

ENDNOTES

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