Education Journal

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September 20

I thought I'd write a bit about my own experience in high school at the outset to establish some context for the remarks and topics that I'll be writing on in the coming entries. Four things distinguish my experience immediately: 1) it was an independent school in Toronto, 2) it was *tiny,* 3) it went from kindergarten all the way to OAC (the now-discontinued grade 13), and 4) under normal circumstances, there was no way my family could afford the tuition, meaning that most of the kids who attended this school were in a different socio-economic class than I.

When I came to Bayview Glen in grade 2, I only spoke Armenian and French. I spent the first few years of my English speaking life observing both the behaviours and the language of my peers, as up to that point I had virtually no contact with North American culture; I guess that's why critical social analysis comes easy to me now – I had to watch from the wings before I knew how to fit in, and have been doing so all my life. My sister and I were admitted through the magnanimity of the headmaster, who worked out a special payment plan with our family, and we both worked as hard as we could to earn academic scholarships when we were old enough to write the exams.

The fact that the school was so small, and that it was possible to spend your entire elementary and secondary career there created a particularly interesting community: imagine going through 10 years of schooling with students, some of which you've known since grade 2. Now imagine the same experience when your graduating class has only 40 students. This is perhaps one of the elements of my education for which I'm most grateful: lasting friendships and an environment so familiar that it felt more like home to me than my family's apartment.

It was once I hit high school and started developing friendships and acquaintances outside the independent school world that I realized the kinds of things I had been taking for granted. My school was one of 50 members of the Round Square (www.roundsquare.org), an organization that promotes "personal development and responsibility" in its students. Over and beyond the sorts of things most students did in Toronto high schools, I *wasn't allowed to graduate* unless I completed 50 hours of community service a year and attended one wilderness survival / leadership program in each grade (these ranged from 2 week canoe trips; to winter camping with dogsleds, cross-country skis and quinzhees; to hiking in Lake Placid; and ending with a solo in final year where students were given a rope, a tarp, some rations and a whistle and placed in an isolated part of Algonquin Park. The whistle was in case you

went crazy.) Furthermore, my school had frequent exchange programs and international development projects, extremely high academic standards and required some athletic activity and fine-arts training from each of its students.

I really began to appreciate all this when I decided to fast-track and had to take a summer English course in the public school system to upgrade my credit. The sheer size of the student body was daunting, and the rigid inflexible structures and rules were something I had to get used to; but the quality of my education was such that out of 600 students I earned the highest mark in the class (my girlfriend at the time scored a fraction of a percentage below me – we both came from Bayview Glen). My peers in summer school were amazed at the sorts of things I knew, and I was equally incredulous at their lack of drive or academic ambition. It was around this time that I decided to myself that I wanted to teach; after making friends with a few of the students in my class some things really became clear to me about the public system: unless you have an incredible teacher, you're not going to amount to much academically or socially. I returned to my school for my senior year with a renewed fervour, all the more grateful for the opportunities I'd been given.

September 21

Since I started becoming serious about teaching, I've always thought about what's wrong with the structure of schooling at the elementary / secondary levels. In my second year, I had the opportunity to study some of these problems in depth through a research methods course in anthropology. I wasn't particularly proud of the paper I submitted, so I want to take this chance to polish off my findings and round them out with a few examples.

In my second year I went away to St. Thomas University in Fredericton, NB. My primary reasons were twofold: two of my most influential role-models (teachers) had attended the school and I wanted to see if being there would give me some insight on what made them tick; and I'm hell-bent on getting into their Education program after graduating, and thought that being conspicuous to the faculty might help my application. While I was there, I founded a volunteer tutoring society that I partnered with a local middle school; twice a week after classes 36 members would go down to Albert St. and help students with homework and assignments. This entailed getting the proposal for the project approved, raising funds, training tutors, appointing an executive and running the program itself: I was pretty busy. Anyway, what I decided to do was use my tutors as test-subjects for the research question: "How can the poor performance of students in the New Brunswick school system be rationalized?" I had each tutor fill out a follow-up questionnaire after their sessions, and through an

in-depth study of these, as well as my own participant observation and a few life-histories, I came up with the following:

"The poor academic performance of some students in the New Brunswick education system can be reduced, in part, to curriculum and policy planning based on an incomplete structural-functionalist analysis and its resulting theoretical framework, further compounded by the research and findings grounded therein." What this meant was, the way planners approached the school system was based on certain assumptions that they projected into an abstract model from which all their work was derived. I identified problems such as the teacher as a symbol, the alienating effect of hierarchical grade systems and enormous school sizes, and the marginalization of the family institution.

I also proposed practical ways of undermining these, that I still believe would be effective, and that I hope one day to be able to implement as a teacher myself. What my tutoring program managed to do was 'erode' the traditional student-teacher binary by challenging students' conception of a teacher as an adult who gets paid and stands in front of the class lecturing; these volunteers were only a few years older than the students themselves, had full lives and were still going through school. A similar effect could be achieved by forcing students to assume the role of teacher themselves, perhaps through a program that paired them with a student from a lower grade. Interactions like this also undermine the grade structure, by bringing students of different ages together; rather than the traditional structural notion of education as a set of rigid steps, students would interact with peers at different stages of schooling than themselves, and realize that they're kids just like them. This builds a new conception of education as a fluid process that I think is much more holistic than the traditional notion. Vis-à-vis the family, the idea of a distinct structure outside the world of the school is problematic: the more family involvement one gets in a school, the more continuous and fluid social boundaries and roles become. As I hope I showed with my own experiences, fluid boundaries are always a good thing.

These were some of the things I managed to articulate based on my findings. It was a thrill to conduct real anthropological research and come up with practical conclusions in my second year; all the more so because they related to my future career. I count myself fortunate to be aware of problems like this before actually going into a school as a teacher; I'm sure I'll be more effective as a result.

September 24

Every Monday I go to a 3rd year seminar class on the history of modern Egypt. The instructor is an excellent teacher who knows his material inside and out, has a

distinctive flair for lecturing and (in my mind) a very healthy pedagogy. There are roughly 20 students enrolled in the class, and we meet only once a week so the sessions are fairly long. I always leave feeling sad, because I see the professor struggling for the entire 2.5 hours to engage a room full of students who refuse to talk, rarely do the readings and don't seem to know any historiographical theory. He really puts himself out there, and no matter how much passion he shows for the material hardly anyone makes eye contact with him. Normally, the discussion is dominated by myself and 2 other students, and characteristic of the classes are awkward pauses where a painfully obvious question goes unanswered because nobody wants to speak up.

How did it come to this? Are big universities like Dalhousie so alienating, or are the students that attend them so indifferent that a traditional seminar-oriented class can't survive? I spent my first year of studies at King's College, a university notorious for its strong personalities and opinionated, pretentious first-years. I spent my second year at St. Thomas University, an equally small liberal arts college with a real social conscience, with good people and great instructors. Now I'm back in Halifax, and I have been for 2 years. Suddenly I'm the most outspoken student in my classes, and not by any effort on my part. It's hard to believe that so many students could have had so many bad experiences in so many different educational systems that they would be so disillusioned as to stay silent in class. I'm more inclined to blame things like iPods, cell phones, omnipresent TV and the dark, desperate need for companionship to escape one's own critical thoughts; and that frightens me. Very few of my peers in university seem to want to do anything except 'hang out' and pass time. When I go out to student societies or council meetings, it's always the same handful of select, motivated students running everything. I have 3 positions on student councils this year. I have friends who have 5 or 6, including subcommittees. It's equally unlikely in my mind that so few students could have had so few positive experiences through their education. The sheer prospect frightens me. I comfort myself, as always, with the mantra "You'll be teaching soon… everything will be fine. You'll be teaching soon… everything will be fine." In the meantime, sometimes I just want to hug my seminar prof.

September 28

I had the good fortune of attending a forum on post-secondary education this evening, hosted by the King's Day Students' Society on my campus. The guests were Darrell Dexter, Francis Mackenzie and Jamie Muir. The structure was as such: each official gave a five-minute opening remark, followed by two minutes rebuttal, followed by 90 minutes of questions from the floor (mainly King's students). I was somewhat disappointed that Dexter didn't manage to engage the crowd, though it was ironically amusing that the Liberal premier – forbidden from speaking about his party's platform – came across as the best speaker.

Anyway, what I found particularly interesting about the evening was the question period that followed the half-hour of embarrassing squabbling between the Tory Minister of Education and the NDP's premier. The themes ranged from hypothetical and historical tuition freezes to the feasibility of their outright abolition; from federal and provincial government funding models for universities, to known issues of deficiency in social welfare and student loan models; even to such trivial issues as taxation on textbooks and sources of funding for infrastructure maintenance. Though I learned quite a bit from the questions and answers themselves, what I found most startling was what *wasn't* asked.

It seemed that both the students and the officials had an unspoken understanding of the postsecondary institution funding model as a strictly-government enterprise: universities get funding from the province, the provinces get equalization grants from Ottawa, etc. However, the federal government and provinces also run the student loan programs, and they do so with public money *only*. If I had the time to stand in line by a microphone, I wish I had the chance to ask this in front of a room full of students that really didn't seem to realize that nothing should be taken for granted:

"When I graduate this year, I will have spent in excess of $35,000 on tuition and books alone. Though I'm lucky that not all of it was borrowed funding, I will have amassed a considerable debt. Now, from my perspective, it's obvious that this debt will be paid off by the money I make from my employer. What doesn't make sense to me is, if we're such a socialist democracy, and if we openly admit that our educational policies are made based on the notion of education as training for work, why don't government officials make the link between private enterprise and student funding? If private enterprise is the institution that benefits the most from our education, why don't we see more investment in students on their part? It seems to me that the most logical, practical step to take would be to have the funding for student loans come from a pot to which private enterprise is forced to contribute as a gesture of faith in

its investment. I invite the three officials at the podium to tell me how this proposal is flawed, and defend the sanctity of big business in the face of the painfully-clear relationships between enterprise and education that I've just underscored."

Oooh, would they ever be mad. Maybe that sort of question is taboo, I don't know; but that's the way I think things should be. Pardon my Marxism.

September 29

As a follow-up to the capitalist thrust I took in my last entry, I want to talk briefly about how I view the history of education unfolding. Of course, whenever I talk about history my methodology is distinctly Marxist, so bear this in mind while reading.

In a nutshell, the Marxist critique argues that there exists a distinct, linear and immutable historical process that has dictated the direction that government, education and business take. Ontario provides us with the perfect example of this development historically. The earliest provincial education system was put together from the bottom-up, decentralized so as to represent the interests of particular communities. We go from this democratic ideal to gradual provincial control and centralization to the emergence of the modern day Ministry of Education. Once this state entity is solidified, we see lobby groups such as businesses able to successfully impose their will on the single entity, something that was much more difficult to achieve through the decentralized, organic community schools at the start of the century.

Gradually, the Ministry takes more and more power away from the school boards that once represented the interests of their communities, and in return imposes policies that are alien and remote, crafted from the petitions of a host of interest groups outside the school communities. With the increasing influence of multinational corporations, we see more and more partnerships between the state and capitalists; this culminates in a gradual merging of their interests as the state gradually begins to concern itself with capital accumulation. This places the fate of education at the caprice of powers that no longer necessarily have the interests of all Canadians at heart, as the ideal of democracy upon which the state structure was built slowly gets replaced by capitalist-sympathetic interests.

Of course, though Marxist doctrine suggests that this process is indeed immutable, it doesn't say that the end result is total hegemony of capitalism over the state; rather, it argues that history unfolds in such a way as to resolve the fundamental contradictions of capitalism through class conflict. Once these contradictions are resolved, the face of education – and indeed the state itself – will look very different.

September 30

"Good afternoon troops. My name is Sgt. Bloggins, I'll be your instructor for the next 40 minutes. What we're going to cover off on [sic] today is _____. My main teaching points are [1], [2], and [3]. Where you will use this information is [a], [b] and throughout your military career. There will be no class answers, I will appoint someone to answer a question when I ask it. If you have a question raise your hand and I'll get to you as soon as I can. Arcs of safety are from 11 to 1 o'clock to your front. The instructor's arcs are 3 o'clock. … In the last 40 minutes you have learned [1], [2] and [3]. You've been a good class, and grasped the knowledge well. With a little more practice, you'll improve your skills to effective levels. Your next lecture will be at 1300 with Mcpl. Blow. Take 5 minutes."

The only speech I know more verbatim than that is the ammo declaration speech after coming off a Canadian Forces range. Absolutely ridiculous. I don't even know where to start on military training; it's so rigid and formulaic that you just stop paying attention. Military lectures are probably the only learning environments where I actually have to struggle to stay awake, though part of that is the 3 hours of sleep you get a night while on course.

What I find interesting about the training process in the army is the ways that the troops find to subvert it. Part of the reason I know this speech by heart is because we'd sit around and poke fun at it and the rest of the military machine every night. The roles are as well defined as they can get, and reinforced with rank structure and deferential custom. And it really doesn't work. If you're going to try to educate troops in an environment as structural as this, there's a key element missing: respect and admiration. The instructors make no effort to earn their students' respect because they don't need to; but that means there's no element of mentorship involved in the process at all. If I'm going to learn something from someone who is defined as 'better' than me through rank and courses, I need to have a reason to respect them for those achievements. I just wish more non-commissioned members realized this, as very few courses are taught by officers.

What I *do* give the military credit for is their programs for educational funding. As a reservist, I get an annual $2000 towards my university tuition above any other pay; this money represents the faith the army has in its investment towards its soldiers. I find it ironic that this can exist in such a rigid structure, when I've gone on *ad nauseum* about the lack of investment from private enterprise. I suppose it's one of the reasons I respect the Canadian government so much. I hope it doesn't go to their heads.

October 1

I'm of the mind that anyone has the capacity to learn anything, given certain conditions. The main condition is that they know *how* to learn, a skill too few people possess. I don't mean to be elitist or inconsiderate when I claim this, though I do count my experiences as evidence thereof. After 4 years of strictly arts and humanities, I took a few intersession courses in mathematics to gain an extra teachable subject. I scored the first, second and fourth highest marks in linear algebra, calculus 1 and calculus 2, respectively. This is not because of any particular facility I have with numbers; I've performed equally well in geology, analytic philosophy and computer science. What distinguished me from most students (and I base this on countless experiences tutoring or discussing course material with peers) was my approach to learning.

This has very much to do with my approach to confronting reality. I have the capacity to find anything interesting, and the engagement with the phenomenon is perhaps the most important learning condition. I firmly believe that everything I learn can be applied in my life, from the most abstract mathematical functions and categories to the most mundane minutiae from 1000 years ago in another part of the world. If it can be contextualized with respect to me, it can be learned and engaged. Sadly, students rarely find things they connect with because the structure of most curricula (especially after outcome-based curriculum theory) divorces the student from the immediacy of the material. Breaking studies up into subjects hardly imparts a continuous, interdisciplinary approach to learning, and a healthy epistemology should never break a whole into parts (such as history, philosophy, anthropology, sociology etc.) without a reason.

A recurring theme in the remarks I've made in earlier entries is the need to break down boundaries, especially if they are put up to artificially demarcate social realms. The same applies to learning: students shouldn't think of education as 'learning math' or 'learning history', for example. Abstract principles and categories from math should actively be applied to historical phenomena – how else could we understand grand-narratives like transcendental idealism, social Darwinism, Marxism or feminism? These narratives are set up just like mathematical algorithms to solve the 'problem of history'. By the same token, the study of mathematics as a monolithic whole, ignoring the historical development of theories, doesn't impart the necessary perspective of development that advances the field. Students *should* learn Euclidean geometry in addition to spherical and hyperbolic; otherwise, they will see the latter two as absolute and never question the foundations of mathematics that have been razed to

the ground time and again throughout history. And these sorts of links are just so damned *interesting*; you can't help but be engaged by them.

Anyway, I wish my final entry was more than just a dogmatic rant; I hoped to make it some sort of capstone that was as applicable universally as it was individually, but it seems like all I've managed to do is pontificate. The notion that everyone has the potential to be an excellent student remains, however, the cornerstone of my teaching methodology and will be for years to come. If there's anything I can do for my future students, it's getting them to realize this potential: it's through this that they will appreciate their education, question the status-quo in the system, actively debate in their university seminars, think critically about social institutions, construct their own narratives, and better understand the learning and teaching process… consequently robbing me of material to write about in this journal.

I hope it was an enjoyable read.