

The Culture of Learning to Teach: The Self-Perpetuating Cycle of Conservative Schooling

By Peter Smagorinsky

In his consideration of the developmental consequences of education, Cole (2005) takes a cross-cultural and historical perspective that leads him back to the earliest classrooms of Indo-European civilization. To consider the historical depth of educational traditions, he infers great stability based on his consideration of the arrangement of a Sumerian classroom in the ancient city of Mari, Syria.¹ This classroom likely originated in the city's second golden age under the Amorite dynasty that lasted from roughly 1,900 BCE through 1759 BCE, when the city was sacked by Hammurabi, sixth king of Babylon.

Cole surmises that the last 4,000 years have seen great continuity in educational practice in a number of regards. As the photograph reveals, students sat in rows—here, fixed in stone—facing the teacher. This template, in spite of other developments in teaching practice, has served to guide instruction in most Western educational settings from Sumerian civilization through the present. Students occupied its seats 1,400 years before Nebuchadnezzar II is believed to have built the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. It is as old as the idea of formal teaching and learning in the history of human social life.

Other ways of teaching and learning have been developed over the millennia. Over 1,500 years after

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students nodded through their teacher's Sumerian lessons, Socrates stepped out from behind the lectern and taught by means of cross-examining and typically refuting his students' assumptions, revealing their sophistical reasoning through the dialogues that he manipulated. Whether he did so as a means of inquiry or as a bully remains open to question (see White, 2001). In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi formulated educational visions that centered on the learner. Rousseau pioneered the Romantic conception of the (male) child as learner and the adult as guide and companion in educational experiences rather than director and authority, an idea that has endured in many forms in Western education, if largely on the margins of the pursuit.

In his history of English education, Applebee (1974) notes that a number of pedagogical traditions are available to teachers, including those that center on the learner, yet most rely on a teacher-and-text-centered approach that could easily have found its home in ancient Mesopotamian classroom spaces (cf. Cuban, 1993). While the students' seats are no longer made of stone and only rarely remain bolted to the floor, they typically stay fixed in one location, facing forward so that students may concentrate on the teacher undistracted by the chatter and shenanigans of their classmates. The image presented in Figure 1 of my aunt's elementary school classroom in Brooklyn in around 1920 shares similarities with both the Sumerian classroom described by Cole (2005) and the University of California, San Diego classroom in which I presented a version of this paper (Smagorinsky, 2008) in which the chairs were indeed bolted to the floor.



Figure 1: *Brooklyn, New York, USA elementary classroom, circa 1920 (from author's family collection).*

Alternative pedagogies originating in the 20th Century, while often aligned with the views of Socrates, Rousseau, and a handful of others, tend to be based in some way on Dewey's progressive views, which generally emerge from the following tenets:

[D]emocracy means active participation by all citizens in social, political and economic decisions that will affect their lives. The education of engaged citizens, according to this perspective, involves two essential elements: (1). *Respect for diversity*, meaning that each individual should be recognized for his or her own abilities, interests, ideas, needs, and cultural identity, and (2). the development of *critical, socially engaged intelligence*, which enables individuals to understand and participate effectively in the affairs of their community in a collaborative effort to achieve a common good. These elements of progressive education have been termed "child-centered" and "social reconstructionist" approaches, and while in extreme forms they have sometimes been separated, in the thought of John Dewey and other major theorists they are seen as being necessarily related to each other. (John Dewey Project on Progressive Education, 2002; emphasis in original)

Such learner-centered, activity-oriented, inquiry-driven, and socially-mediated methods have had many incarnations over the years. From the schools founded by Italians Maria Montessori in Rome and Loris Malaguzzi in Reggio Emilia, to Kilpatrick's (1918) project method, to the arts-oriented educational initiatives emerging from Harvard University's Project Zero, to notions of authentic assessment (Wiggins, 1993), to other student-driven curricula throughout the world, educators have attempted to chip away at the edifice of authoritarian schooling for many years, establishing important programs and creating alternatives to placing students in passive, receptive, mimetic, and stationary roles. In spite of the possibilities they have demonstrated, these approaches have largely been either the province of specialized schools or tangential practices existing on the margins of mainstream schooling. Meanwhile, teacher-and-text-centered instruction—referred to by Hillocks (1986) as "presentational" and by Goodlad (1984) as "frontal" teaching—reiterates and reifies the dominant instructional practices of at least the last two (Cohen, 1989) or four (Cole, 2005) millennia.

Many commentators believe that such persistence is a consequence of teachers' lack of awareness of more progressive alternatives. If only they were exposed to better options, say the critics, they would embrace them. Dewey himself initially felt that teachers could leap the chasm between traditions if sufficiently schooled in new methods:

Both *The School and Society* [1900], and *The Child and The Curriculum* [1902], two of Dewey's most popular books, depict what he called the "old education" as the result of misguided ideas about learning and teaching. In these and other writings, Dewey seems to assume that once teachers understand what he sometimes called the "laws of psychology," they would be in a position to set things right. This impression is reinforced by the account offered in [Mayhew & Edwards, 1966]. The book reveals that Dewey and the teachers had no idea how difficult it

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would be to teach as he wished. Dewey confirms this in memoranda to the authors. (Cohen, 1989, p. 79)

Based on my reading, research, and experiences as both a classroom teacher and teacher educator, I accept Dewey's ultimate recognition that the problem is not simply that teachers are unaware of alternatives to schooling as usual, and that better teacher education is the solution to making schools the sites of more active learning. I will argue instead that the issue is a function of the culture of schooling, a culture embedded in 4,000 years of stone and seemingly impervious to real, systemic change.

Beginning Teachers and the Self-Perpetuating Cycle of Conservative Schooling

It now turns to how my thinking about teacher education from a cultural-historical perspective has been influenced by my experiences as a U.S. high school English teacher from 1976-1990, as a teacher educator since 1990, and as a researcher studying teachers as they move from their teacher education programs to their first jobs. This research program was carried out under the sponsorship of the National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement (CELA) and designed with my colleagues Pam Grossman and Sheila Valencia (see Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia, 1999). The research was planned to focus on the pedagogical tools that teachers learn to employ in the multiple settings of learning to teach, particularly their teacher education programs and the sites of their teaching, including both their student teaching internships and their first jobs.

The studies I have conducted undoubtedly provide a limited basis from which to launch a grand historical narrative, given that each is a case study. What I have found from working in this manner is that case studies are useful in several ways, although rarely conclusive given their narrow scope. First, they provide a detailed look at a particular person's or small group's experience and so may either complement studies with larger samples or make singular points of their own (see Bloome & Bailey, 1992; Valsiner, 1998). Perhaps more importantly, they have a sort of generalizability that I find very useful: that of typifying a kind of experience. A final attribute of case studies is that they may provide detailed information about counter-examples that help explain discrepant or typical data in larger studies. And so while they do not allow for generalizations to the population at large, they do help to explain why types of people have types of experiences. As long as inferences are limited to similar populations in similar situations, they are amenable to qualified generalizations.

The studies I have done through CELA lend credence to the widespread belief that the influence of the university program often quickly gives way to the values of school sites. The central tradition of U.S. schools, as I have reviewed, is one designed to conserve educational practice as teacher-and-text-centered and

thus authoritarian in nature. In contrast to Deweyan progressivism, the emphasis is on the subject more than on the child, on knowledge as fixed rather than as on constructed, on the authority of the text over the constructions of the learner, on rote learning more than on discovery, on passivity rather than on activity, and so on. Of course this dichotomy overlooks much in between and outside the confines of these two extremes. Yet they provide what I see as the central tension faced by beginning teachers as they make the transition from their university programs to their first jobs. As is common among teachers at large, the teachers I have studied learn some version of a progressive pedagogy in universities that they find difficult to practice in the conservative setting of schools.

I next review how a whole cycle of a beginning teacher's experiences with school and college contribute to a conception of educational practice that, as Cohen (1989) and others have argued, makes it difficult for a progressive pedagogy to get an initial foothold and then establish a stronger position in the U.S. K-12 educational system. I consult my own CELA studies, other research I have conducted in secondary school classrooms, and research carried out by others to describe the self-perpetuating cycle that follows.

K-12 Apprenticeship of Observation

Lortie (1975) has referred to a person's experiences as a student as an *apprenticeship of observation*. His choice of terms is propitious, given that what most students do throughout their schooling is observe; or, if not observe, daydream while their teachers talk (Bloom, 1954; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993). By all accounts students do not talk or do a great deal in classrooms. Rather, most students go through school experiencing rote instruction in which their role is largely subordinate and mimetic.

Just as socialization into gender roles may begin in the cradle, as found by Rubin, Provenzano, and Luria (1974), students' socialization into authoritarian schooling may begin as soon as children toddle through their first classroom door. Although her story is no doubt particular to her situation in many ways, the insight of Penny, a CELA research participant (Smagorinsky, 1999), suggests how schools often serve to create deep impressions in children regarding how the institution functions. Penny's teacher education program had a strong orientation to constructivist pedagogical practices. While discussing the difficulties she was having getting her first-grade students to think creatively and constructively about the open-ended tasks she would provide for them, Penny realized that her students had already been profoundly conditioned to regard school as a place where their role was to follow instructions rather than frame and solve problems related to their own views of the world:

Q: From what you just told me, what's difficult for the children is not what's cognitively challenging in the material or the assignments, but almost a social fit with the pacing or—

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Penny: No, no, see, they're really good at that. It's unpacing them and unstructuring them is what's hard. . . . Most of them have been in Kindergarten, Transition at [the school], so this is in actuality, for students this is their third year there. So I mean, you've got all this structure going on for three years, which is, gee, half their lives, so to then say what's unstructured, they're kinda like, "What?"

"Transition" referred to the school district's policy of allowing students to delay entry into first grade by attending a year of school between kindergarten and first grade. The fact that many students had been enrolled in a Transition year and thus had already been socialized for half of their lives into the traditional structure of the school made it difficult for her to operate with a different pace, one that allowed for more exploration of ideas and personal construction of knowledge.

Even in first grade, then, many students have already become so enculturated to authoritarian schooling—following instructions, moving within rigid channels, remaining seated and silent—that "unpacing them and unstructuring them" becomes difficult. The students described by Penny were in school before George W. Bush mandated the No Child Left Behind Act, which superimposes a standardized testing system that institutionalizes a uniform set of expectations on all students and consequently on all teachers at the primary school level. Administered top-down and establishing orthodox conceptions of literacy learning, NCLB further narrows the channels through which students may navigate school through the implication that there are specifically right and wrong ways in which to answer questions, and few if any opportunities to *ask* questions (Gall & Rhody, 1987).

As schema theorists might say, the deep processing of students' conception of schooling is established early and thus powerfully (Craik & Lockhart, 1972). And if Cole (1996) is right in saying that from a cultural-historical perspective, schemata are cultural in nature—that is, learned as part of engagement with the activities of a particular community of practice, in this case school—students learn early in life to expect and act within an authoritarian system in each subsequent experience with school, especially as the schema becomes reinforced with continual experiences of the same type.

Secondary School Apprenticeship of Observation

If first grade has already involved considerable socialization to the cultural norms of authoritarian schooling, by the time students reach middle school they have spent the bulk of their lives in rote education. There is little evidence to suggest that schools become more flexible as they take on the second half of their compulsory education. Many accounts of the secondary school experience characterize it as, to use Goodlad's (1984) term, a "flat" experience (p. 108): one that involves little activity or affect and little engagement with the tasks of memorization that typify it.

Even when teachers depart from lectures and lead discussions, classrooms often remain hierarchical. English teachers, for instance tend to lead "discussions" in which they steer students toward conventional interpretations of literature, in

spite of claims to be seeking open-ended exchanges that are akin to musical “jam sessions.” As described by Marshall, Smagorinsky, and Smith (1995; cf. Nystrand, 1997 for similar effects with a larger sample), teachers ran their discussions “to ‘get somewhere,’ especially to a shared and conventional interpretation.” Further,

Instead of the student-centered discussions that the teachers envisioned, teachers controlled the flow of the discussions. On average, their turns in discussions were two to five times longer than those of the students. The nature of their questions determined the nature of students’ remarks. In addition, the teachers tended to provide the context in which students’ remarks became meaningful. Teachers would typically weave the brief informative statements of students into a coherent discourse. Students’ turns were intelligible only because of the context that teachers provided for them.

Given that literary discussion is among the most interpretive aspects of a school curriculum, it is likely that in other disciplines, the students’ role is even less agentive than in the marginally active manner found by Marshall et al. (1995). Even in English class literature discussions, classroom episodes as brief as a few minutes are celebrated as signifying hope for more dialogic possibilities in literary discussions (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001). The norm, in contrast, is for teachers to dominate through lecture or teacher-centered discussions. This pattern has been well-documented as the “I-R-E” pattern (Mehan, 1979), in which the teacher initiates a topic with a statement or question, a student provides a brief response, and the teacher in turn evaluates the student’s comment or elaborates on it, leaving students primarily in the role of slotting bits of knowledge into the teacher’s preconceived view. Students rarely pose questions (Gall & Rhody, 1987), and the questions asked by teachers most commonly have predetermined correct answers, rather than being open-ended, idiosyncratic, stimulating, or engaging—what Nystrand (1997) calls *authentic* questions.

Of course, not all teachers are so doctrinaire in their instruction, as Marshall et al. (1995) find. Undoubtedly there are many exceptions to schooling as usual, as outlined and advocated by educators over the years (see, e.g., the contributors to Christenbury, Bomer, & Smagorinsky, 2009). Yet the singular instruction documented in such studies is, by all accounts, among the minor traditions that Applebee (1974) has found in the history of English as a discipline. What makes it exceptional is the relative absence of such teaching in the bulk of U.S. classrooms.

University Apprenticeship of Observation

With such methods comprising the bulk of their experiences as middle and high school students, prospective teachers then enter college. If they attend a large state university of the sort that provides the profession with the majority of K-12 teachers, they spend their first few years taking classes in large lecture halls where their role is to listen and take notes, and then be assessed through multiple choice exams. In the domain of English, which provides the site for my research

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on beginning teachers, in upper level English courses the norm is for professors to emphasize their own approach to literary criticism (Addington, 2001; Marshall & Smith, 1997). The student's role is to adopt a specific critical perspective for approaching literary texts by attending carefully to the professor's lectures and the wisdom of professional critics. Indeed, in U.S. universities most classes are known as a *lecture* and the instructor's role is to *profess*, hardly terms that suggest high levels of student activity or professorial attention to learning processes.

Andrea, a CELA participant, articulated the expectations of university English course work well, saying:

I feel that when you come to college you have accepted a certain path of education, saying you are more willing now to be a receptacle and more independent. When I showed up to [English] classes, I got and expected lectures. I showed up to hear those professors' opinions of what was happening, and I would still feel that way in a college class. I wouldn't object to taking a class that somebody told me they were going to teach in a new way, but I don't feel resentment toward anyone that they are going to teach it in a lecture format. . . . The student at that point chooses to study a subject that they are better able to study, and therefore they can deal with the fact that it is not presented to them in an easy, or not an easier format, but isn't tailored to striving to help them understand it. By the time they have reached college education they are in charge of making sure that they are understanding what is happening.

Andrea's comments reflect the findings of Addington (2001) and Marshall and Smith (1997), who conclude that learning processes and idiosyncratic readings (and thus open-ended writing) receive little emphasis in the Departments of English of large state universities. Rather, the role of students is to attend to a set of masters—literary authors, literary critics, and literature professors—whose views and models they are expected to adopt in order to achieve disciplinary competence.

Teacher Education Program

Ultimately, those who take a traditional path to a teaching career enroll in education coursework. While such programs vary greatly from university to university, most often they involve enrollment in courses in such areas as educational foundations, technology, adolescent development, and exceptional learners, followed by instruction in a teaching methods class. Typically this coursework includes some sort of practicum and concludes with student teaching. Prior to enrollment in these classes, they have taken 8-15 courses in departments of English, which tend to overwhelm their relatively few education classes, described by some as a "band-aid" at the end of the program which is expected to erase the prior 15 years of exposure to authoritarian teaching and replace that conception wholesale with a progressive vision of education (see Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998).

Even the practica and student teaching, believed by many to serve as the cornerstone of effective teacher education (Graham, Hudson-Ross, Adkins, McWhorter,

& McDuffie Stewart, 1999), can serve to reproduce rather than challenge school norms. Consider, for example, a fourth-grade classroom I studied taught by Sharon, a university classmate of Penny's (see Smagorinsky, Cook, Jackson, Moore, & Fry, 2004). In the classroom that hosted her internship, not only were the students allowed little latitude in their learning, the student teacher herself felt so confined that she declared at one point:

I don't know if I am going to be able to [use a constructivist pedagogy] within this classroom. I don't know how much leeway [my mentor teacher] is going to give me. And I know not to step on her toes. She will definitely bop me back in line. That is pretty evident. She doesn't—I mean, she thinks that I should be there to learn from her and not to in any way take over her classroom.

Getting bopped back in line can occur in many ways and can discourage both student teachers and beginning teachers from violating the established practices of the schools in which they teach. Sharon articulated this concern well when she stated in an interview, "What I am concerned about is, I think, that throughout this semester, being with my [cooperating] teacher as opposed to being at [the university], I just hope that I don't totally switch to her side." Sharon here refers to her own precarious position as a student teacher, rather than to her students' experiences in her mentor teacher's classroom. Yet it was clear from the research that her students were also concerned about getting bopped back in line should they step outside the lines that circumscribed their social or academic behavior in this classroom. Sharon's concern that she might "totally switch to her side" reflects a common experience for beginning teachers: that the pressure to abandon the university's priorities is great and that the socialization of new teachers to the school's norms remains a primary focus of the mentoring of student teachers and teachers in their first jobs.

Back to the Future: Returning to the Culture of Schools

With such preparation, teachers then return to the schools to begin their careers. As Lortie (1975) observes, the type of people who decide to become teachers often choose teaching as a profession because they had very high comfort levels with authoritarian instruction while students, and return to schools for their careers because they wish to become part of authoritarian institutions. Faculties, then, tend to reproduce themselves by hiring people who will perpetuate their values; and the pool from which they draw their candidates is filled with people who are inclined to oblige. As a result, beginning teachers find themselves surrounded by colleagues who adhere to the same practices that they experienced as students. In many cases they prefer hierarchical instruction to progressive pedagogies and so are good fits with schools (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985); and even when they would prefer taking a progressive or constructivist approach to instruction, they run the risk of getting bopped back in line by their senior colleagues.

The reliance on authoritarian, fact-oriented instruction is further reinforced by

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external factors, particularly testing mandates. Assessment practices are instituted at a variety of levels, virtually all of which emphasize content coverage and, if writing is evaluated, form-oriented writing expectations. As noted with NCLB, such assessments are not attentive to process-oriented learning or constructive thinking. And so district-wide tests stress the memorization of information from the curriculum and suggest that teaching should focus on emphasizing the facts that will appear on these assessments (see, e.g., Smagorinsky, Gibson, Moore, Bickmore, & Cook, 2004; Smagorinsky, Lakly, & Johnson, 2002). State writing tests typically require fitting ideas into rigid forms such as the five-paragraph theme, often regardless of domain, so that even when prompts call for narratives, the scoring rubrics evaluate the writers' proficiency in terms of a five-paragraph presentation (Hillocks, 2002). Such assessments suggest that teachers should emphasize the production of the form rather than the generation of ideas, an approach compatible with the generally authoritarian values of schools (see Smagorinsky, Cook, & Johnson, 2003).

The institutions of school and teacher education programs thus invoke different, and opposing, traditions for their conceptions of quality instruction. Caught in the midst of this tension are beginning teachers, who must please education faculty for high grades yet also sufficiently impress the school administrators who are tasked with hiring faculty and deciding whom to retain. These tensions can make life miserable for beginning teachers who are also trying to cope with many other life adjustments involved in transitioning from the womb of the university to the responsibilities of adult life: moving to a new community, establishing a residence, maintaining friendships, and so on (see McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005).

Discussion

We should perhaps not be too surprised that teachers are conflicted as they are caught among competing traditions, and be surprised only that they do actually experience some degree of tension. A small consolation, yet perhaps sufficient given the preponderance of exposure they have over the course of their education to the teacher- and text-centered tradition that focuses on the mastery of what Dixon (1975) called the cultural heritage perspective against which College of Education faculty often position themselves. Beginning teachers return to schools perhaps predisposed to embrace conventional schooling practices and are surrounded by faculty and administrators who, like themselves, felt comfortable enough in the climate of schools that they made a conscious decision to dedicate their professional lives to teaching in such a setting. One of my preservice teachers reported upon returning from a job interview, after he had described some innovative teaching ideas he had developed at the university, the principal said, "I know they teach you that stuff up there. But y'all are *down here* now." The wonder, then, is not that coursework in education has such little lasting impact, but that it has any impact at all.

From a cultural-historical perspective, schools are resistant to change for many

reasons that collude to reproduce values and processes that are as old as formal education itself. Rather than pointing to single causes for the “wash out” effect that occurs when educators abandon their education professors’ imperatives and gravitate to school norms (Zeichner & Tabachnik, 1981), educators who hope to contribute to change would benefit from recognizing the panoply of factors that not only have immediate effects but that work across generations of educators to preserve and perpetuate authoritarian schooling. Developing a conception of teaching has been found to follow a twisting path (Smagorinsky et al., 2003) as teachers find themselves working within competing traditions and answering to different values in the assessment of their work. Ultimately, the edifice of schooling has remained largely intact in spite of critics’ efforts to question its essential processes; and ultimately, the path of concept development that teachers follow is inevitably formed in part by the contours provided by conventional schooling. Recognizing the power of such deeply-rooted culture and its strength in resisting efforts to change it may help teacher educators understand the depths of the challenge they face in attempting to have a lasting impact on the practice of education.

Note

¹ A photo of this classroom, along with other classrooms of similar organization, is available at <http://www.infodiv.unimelb.edu.au/tss/archive/history.html>; and a pdf version of Cole’s article is posted at <http://lhc.ucsd.edu/People/MCole/humdev.pdf>, where the photo is reproduced on p. 200.

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