The Hidden Curriculum of Cornell

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What do our parents want from us? This question begins as soon as we gain our self-consciousness—the psychological awareness most children begin to gain around 2 years old—and continues into adolescence and beyond, until adulthood. Or does it continue on into adulthood? When do we stop being externally motivated by the authorities in our lives, when we ourselves become an authority? Is it possible for children and adolescent students to become internally motivated even when external motivation is so strongly utilized in school environments?

And Me

These questions are the ones are I starting asking my third semester at Cornell and I have slowly begun to answer them throughout my education minor experience. While I have learned many psychological and sociological theories; principles of teaching; and facts and figures on No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Desegregation, Brown v. Board, and My Brother’s Keeper (MBK); I have learned the most through a hidden curriculum present here at Cornell through social learning taking place in the many different cultural climates on campus. The cultural climates I refer to include climates that have been created by the professor and students of each class I have enrolled in. In every climate, a standard was set, a way of seeing the world was presented and the class collectively agreed to care about what the figure of authority cared about.
For most of my life I resented this mode of teaching, the “sage on the stage” teaching method. I reacted with contempt and rebellion until I was asked by Jeff Perry to step into the role of authority in field work for his course, Art of Teaching. Through being a teaching assistant for Mr. Walters’ and Mr. Buchner’s middle school technology classes, I learned that the role I had highly criticized and resented for so long was one of the most difficult jobs to perform. My first realization of this was through trying to teach a 7th grader how to draw a piece of machinery in correct two-point perspective. I had never realized that something that comes so easily to me could be so difficult to teach. Giving knowledge is not a simple transfer, it cannot be done outside of relationship between student and teacher.

For once the phrase “you’ll understand when you’re older” began to ring true. Not until I stepped into a parental-type role did I begin to understand what our parents want from us. The empathy that was shaped by standing in Mr. Buchner’s shoes, in front of his blackboard, was what began to change my consideration of what I knew to the way I knew it and “identify and share an inner psychological life”, which all parents and authoritative roles want for children and adolescents to grow (Kegan, 1994). The desire of parents, teachers, Cornell, and the educational system is that all children will grow out of childhood dependency and into the fullness of adulthood- an adulthood that is self-motivated, conscientious, and trustworthy. But beyond my appreciation for authority and my ability to know how I know what I know, my perspective has
broadened to see the wide selection of hidden curriculum that is present and available as examples from my professors and peers. By defining and articulating the vessel and methods through which I was taught here at Cornell I’ve begun to recognize the cultural traditions, socioeconomic factors, and assumptions I bring into the classroom both as a student and as a teacher. In one sense this has caused a dis-ordering, a recognition of views and knowledge I was previously subjected to.

Richard Rohr, Franciscan monk and founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation, uses a simple metaphor to describe transformation to his students. He tells them, “Picture three boxes: order, disorder, reorder” (Rohr, 2017). This is the common path of transformation seen in mythical stories, folk stories, and great religions of the world. Whether it is the classic story of a boy who goes off to war and comes back a world-wizened hero, or the fundamental principle of enlightenment in Buddhism, the path of transformation through the gaining of knowledge takes the order-disorder-reorder form. This knowledge can be attained through numerous educational methods: reading, lectures, experiential learning, social learning, side-by-side peer observation, etc. Through any of these methods, learning requires an initial stepping into disorder and then out of it into reorder. This process describes the integration of the new knowledge into old knowledge and the forming of a new mental schema.
The Piagetian concept of growth echoes Rohr by describing a child learning as they move from being subjected to their own view of the world to objecting it. The child has their own sense instead of being their senses. They no longer consider the world to literally turn black when they close their eyes but simply know that they are closing their eyes and the world remains. Kegan posits, “it is our embeddedness, our subjectivity, that leads us to project it onto the world in our constitution of reality” and that we continually object those views we are subject to in order to obtain growth—or to Rohr, transformation (Kegan, 1982). This order-disorder-reorder, integrative process of objecting our own views and creating momentary disorder for the sake of reordering new views based on new knowledge is a delicate and difficult process. It requires trust, between the teacher and the learner and recognition of what “order” they both are stepping into the process with. As I move forward in my cycles of order-disorder-reorder I will continue to seek a perspective that lends the most trust and safety for the teacher-student relationship.

And Culture

The hidden curriculum threaded through my undergraduate education has taught me many important introspective truths which effect micro relationships on the educational plane of learning in the classroom and in tutoring settings. It has also taught me the greater educational narratives and hidden curriculum that runs through the history of education in America. One of the greatest global cultural narratives
present in this era is “education as savior”. While I do not disagree that education is one of the most important things in my life and I owe almost all of what I know to teachers and writers who passed on their knowledge to me, there is a problem with subscribing to this narrative of the educational savior. Learning happens in many different methods, through many different forms of scaffolding created by teachers and curriculum.

The dominant educational method used globally today is the white, post-industrialization, authoritative method. These methods are Eurocentric, focusing on classroom learning models, test-taking, and isolated intellectual exercises. They have been used many times to teach non-European cultures that modern, western ways are better. Methods and curricula shape individuals just as much as one teacher’s perspective can shape a student’s way of thinking. While there may not be something inherently wrong with Eurocentric methods, Dewey and Langer (1997) propose a “rut” results from learning a subject from one individual perspective with the concept that it is the “correct” perspective (p. 8). This one individual perspective on learning is what damaged many African American students’ sense of self-worth and culture post-desegregation and killed many Native American children in assimilationist boarding schools. The standards pushed through education are powerful and should be treated with utmost care, on the classroom level and policy level. Neither one is necessarily more powerful than the other and their strength lies in the both/and of educational
intersectionality. Every perspective matters, every factor -outside and inside the classroom- matters, and every student-teacher interaction matters.

Through my exploration of the history of education and the methods employed which brought us to the educational meritocratic system we have today, I have been disappointed by the amount of unnecessary harm that has been inflicted on those that do not fit into the dominant constructed order of the educational system in the U.S.. Students of color, students with disabilities, students with different cultural backgrounds, students of low-income all deserve better than what the system has to offer. The intricacies of fixing it and the intersectionality of policies that could remedy our many structural problems are beyond me at this point in my student career, but recognizing the problem is the beginning of entering disorder and one step towards the reordering in another cycle of order-disorder-reorder. I hope that this next one does more good than the harm many of the past efforts have.

