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# Rewarding the obedient: What is really being taught at the faculties of education? An experiential account

By Carlo Ricci

## Abstract

This is a qualitative theoretical piece that explores how I believe many faculties teach their students misinformation. As well, it includes a list of messages that are taught at many faculties of education that work counter to a democratic objective. It concludes with the message that wanting the best for our children requires confident, competent, professionals that can think critically and creatively, and who are not obedient fearful automatons.

Before I formally begin writing my paper, I would like to offer an explanation of the spirit in which the paper will be written. As well, I will offer a brief connection of how my work fits in with both holistic theories of education and critical pedagogy. The spirit that informs this piece is captured by a message that John Holt shares in one of his letters that appeared in a book edited by Susannah Sheffer (1990):

This is indeed part of what I am trying to tell teachers – that the things they learn or feel they are learning from their direct contact with and observation of children are more important and what is even more important more to be trusted than what the theoreticians may tell them. This is a heretical view, I know, but it is my own.  
(p. 55)

I would like to make this view my own as well. I offer an experiential account informed by my direct observation, rather than a position couched in theoretical jargon. Having

said that, there are those that are not comfortable with this view and do not trust themselves, and who need the affirmation of a theoretical tradition. They need a canonical voice to assure and ease their uneasiness. For them, I offer the following support from a holistic and then a critical perspective.

David Hunt (1987) points out the importance of beginning with ourselves: “Your common sense ideas and your unexpressed theories, growing out of your own personal experience, provide enormously rich sources of knowledge about human affairs” (p. 1). In this paper I incorporate their thinking. I write the paper by beginning with myself, and I urge faculties to allow their students to do the same. Faculties should avoid trying to turn out trained teachers that have access to recipes of teaching; instead, they should allow students to unfold. Jack Miller (2002) writes about how Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott are prophets for holistic learning: “Unlike many educators of the time who focused on controlling children, these three thinkers advised teachers to respect the intuitive wisdom of children (p. 201). Likewise, faculties of education should avoid trying to control teacher candidates and instead respect their intuitive wisdom.

Joe Kincheloe (1998), a critical pedagogue, writes about how, “Post-formal thinking provides the concrete grounding necessary for teacher self-direction, teacher empowerment” (p. 11). He describes post-formalism as one that, “engages a form of self-reflection and cognitive self-monitoring” (p. 10). He argues that,

The implicit message of older paradigmatic teacher education, the positivistic research that often grounds it, and the state and provincial reform movements that share the same epistemological assumptions is that teachers must do what they are told, what they are authorized to do, and that they must be careful about thinking

for themselves. Such caution eventually turns into apathy as teachers lose interest in the creative aspects of pedagogy that originally attracted them to the profession. (p. 8)

My experiential account is informed by my experience as a student and now a teacher in a faculty of education. We must break away from the positivistic assumptions that Kincheloe warns us about and embrace a more holistic and post-formalist position when delivering teacher education.

In April 2004, I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to travel to Cameroon with a wonderful group of people. The group included eight student teacher candidates from a faculty of education and four faculty members. One of the most educationally meaningful results of traveling abroad is that you gain a much clearer and deeper sense of your home country's practices and theoretical assumptions. Among the many experiences we encountered, the candidates had an opportunity to practice teach abroad in an environment that, at first, seemed very different from our own.

While we were in a small village of about 5,000 people, we all stayed in the same home. At night, we all gathered in a large, mostly square-shaped, greeting room that had chairs and couches along the periphery, and a huge open space in the centre. This space was where we gathered, and where the candidates busily and impressively prepared their lesson plans and completed their work for the next school day. The rich exchange of dialogue among our group members was impressively fertile.

During one exchange, a candidate who was responsible for teaching the push/pull factors that lead to urban sprawl developed a lesson that was truly inspiring, to say the least. The lesson was one that would engage the local Cameroonian students in a

pedagogically sound educational experience that they would likely never forget. The lesson included a variety of teaching and learning strategies, and student interaction that would have made for an intense learning experience for all of the students. The next morning, armed with this pedagogical work of genius, the candidate walked to school. As became customary, the faculty members would visit the schools to assist and support our highly capable candidates in any way we could. For me, each trip I took to the schools was an enlightening learning experience, and therefore, the trips were one of the many daily highlights.

As I walked by the school the next morning I noticed that the candidate and the associate teacher (the teacher whose class the candidate takes over to practice teach) were in the library (the inside of the school library is visible to those walking outside). The candidate looked a little deflated, while the associate teacher looked to be in good spirits and cheerful. Two of the faculty members on this trip had been to Cameroon before, and had forewarned me of the didactic teacher-centered approach to teaching that dominates the schools. Armed with this forewarning, I quickly assessed the situation and concluded that the associate teacher did not like the candidate's highly inspiring lesson (which would account for the candidate's deflated look), and that the associate teacher was coaching the candidate in best practices (which would account for his cheerful look). Once I approached the candidate and the associate, we talked and my assessment of the situation was confirmed.

At this point, I had a mix of emotions. Along with the candidate, I felt deflated, but I also felt laughter. Not a humorous laughter, but a laughter that Foucault (1998) characterizes as one that shatters (p. 377). In Foucault's case, the laughter is directed at

the exotic charm of another system of thought that the fable in this “certain Chinese encyclopedia” reveals. Among the categories that the animals are divided into are, belonging to the Emperor, having just broken a water pitcher, and that from a long way off look like flies. The reason that Foucault’s laughter is one that shattered is that this glimpse into what he describes as an exotic system of thought manifests the limitation of our own system of classification (p. 377). Order, Foucault points out, manifests itself in language as if it is already there, and science and philosophy try to justify why this order has been adopted rather than another. However, “these orders are perhaps not the only possible ones or the best ones” (p. 381). In my case, what was shattered was the belief that this would never happen in our practices at home. It shattered this belief in at least two ways: First, by reminding me that the lack of agency and lack of empowerment the candidate faced in a small village in Cameroon is similar to what candidates experience at home, despite our belief or hope to the contrary. The second requires a bit more information in order to clarify. Part of what the associate teacher was sharing with the candidate was that the candidate needed to teach only what is in the text, and the best way to teach what is in the text is, essentially, to read out the text to the students (the teacher has the text and the students do not). One argument made in the text was that there are more people in the cities than in rural communities because women are more fertile in the cities. The candidate felt that this was misinformation and that he should not be made to share this misinformation with his students. The dilemma, of course, which we later discussed as a group, is that the students are required to pass a series of standardized tests before they can graduate. If the students do not have this information, and it appears on

the test, have we then failed the students by not sharing this with them? This is a very puzzling dilemma.

To summarize the second point alluded to above, it is clear to most of us that in this example the associate teacher and the text are expecting the candidate to transmit false information to the students. The question then becomes, in our faculties of education are we playing the same game with our candidates? Are we transmitting information that we believe to be true, albeit well intentioned, but that in actuality may be false? Are we masking our biases behind the face of objectivity and truth? Are we teaching them what we believe to be best practices, but that may not be? Are we, in our own way, teaching them that there are more people in cities than in rural areas because women are more fertile in the cities? Are Piaget, Bloom, Kohlberg, and Gardner, for example, correct? Do we know the criticisms leveled at these theorists' works by critical pedagogues and holistic educators that, in part, argue that their positions are largely Eurocentric, male dominated, and culturally blind? For example, in *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* Carol Gilligan critiques Lawrence Kohlberg, and in a book edited by Joe Kincheloe (2004), *Multiple Intelligences Reconsidered*, the writers challenge Howard Gardner.

#### The Medium Is the Message

Now that I have established the likelihood that in both the dictatorially run country of Cameroon's system of education, and in our own, candidates are disempowered and taught misinformation, let's explore what other messages candidates get by being treated to our faculties of education. Marshall McLuhan helped us understand that the medium is the message. Therefore, we need to ask what message is

being taught to candidates who enter a faculty of education? Alternatively, after attending the medium of a faculty of education, with what message do the candidates graduate? The response from those of us who value a meaningful democracy, I am afraid, is bleak. Chomsky (2000) defines a meaningful democracy as, “involving opportunities for people to manage their own collective and individual affairs” (p. 136). Below, I will offer a list of messages that I believe are taught at many faculties of education that work counter to this laudable democratic objective:

*Conforming to the herd leads to good teaching.* From the moment of first contact between the student teacher candidates and those who run the education program, candidates begin the processes of replacing their sense of personal self with a teacher self. Candidates are directed in how to act, how to behave, how to dress and so on. If they do not already conform to the ideal of what it means to be a teacher, they are forced to conform through peer pressure and fear of failure.

*Experts know what is best for students, candidates do not.* By bombarding candidates with names, theories and rules of best practice, candidates are made to feel overwhelmed and anxious about how little they know, and how little they will likely ever know. Instead of being led to feel internally confident and empowered by how much they know, and taught that experience and contemplation will guide them through the complex process and art of teaching, they are taught that relying on external information provided to them by experts that have discovered these scientific truths is what will make them good teachers.

*To be a good teacher, it is necessary to perform boring and meaningless work.* This point will resonate with those who believe that school skills are transferred to the



work environment. They might argue that the most important skill candidates will gain in preparing themselves to become teachers is to replicate this asset by participating in boring meaningless work while at the faculties.

*What you are asked to do is not what you need to do to be a successful teacher, but you need to do it anyway.* At the faculty, candidates are asked to create endless detailed lesson plans and to stick to their plans as closely as possible. Instead, it would be best to have candidates practice reacting to spontaneity and the unexpected. By having them do things and then revealing to them that most teachers do not teach in this way, but yet, it is essential for them as beginning teachers to do it, we are preparing them for the task of doing what you are asked told even if it does not contribute to making them a more successful teacher.

*Curriculum is important, people are not.* Candidates are taught that what they believe and what they are interested in is unimportant. Likewise, they are taught that what students believe to be important and what they are interested in is even less of a concern. Candidates are taught that experts have painstakingly laid out the curriculum for them and that they should capitulate to this expertise. When they plan their lessons, they need to ensure that their lessons are connected to the curriculum documents developed by the experts. If they or the students disagree then the faculties need to end their opposition.

*Take orders, listen, and do as they are told.* This message is one that reigns supreme in many training systems, and comes through clearly at the faculty. Candidates often complain to me that their year at the faculty is one where they need to continue with what has made them successful throughout their schooling. They need to jump through the hoops by doing what they are told.

*Don't question.* Among themselves, teacher candidates constantly question the message, authority or content of what is going on at the faculty; however, rarely do they have a forum to do so openly in their formal classroom setting. In my classes I try to create an environment where candidates feel compelled to challenge and question substantive issues and points raised in class. They often complain sadly to me that they agree that the education system is flawed, but if they are fortunate enough to get a job they are going to continue doing what they learned at the faculty: to be silent. They argue that they need and want to work, they do not want to get fired, and therefore they feel the pressure and need to obey and not to question.

*Authority judges how well you are doing.* With the emphasis on marks and grading, candidates are made to feel that they cannot judge their own performance, but that a teacher or authority needs to appreciate or disparage their work.

*The way to succeed is to comply.* I often share, with my candidates, a frightening possibility: What if we are here not because we are the cream of the crop, the brightest and the best, but because we listen, we conform, we are willing to obey and therefore we have been rewarded? We are here because we are willing to accept whatever they tell us. We are willing to reiterate the information they have trained us to repeat back to them on an exam, for instance. We have proved that we can carry out orders, follow directions and not challenge the system. Those that do not are punished with failure and the threat of a less affluent future. We can be trusted. Of course, they often agree but feel that they are the exception to this state of affairs.

*Complying increases your chances of getting a job.* Candidates are often threatened with the unthinkable: If they do not comply, they will never get a job. They

need to complete all that they are told, because if they do not, no principal will ever hire them. The fear that they will lose their livelihood after so many years of schooling and such hard work is one that works well as a threat.

In conclusion, just as in all complex systems, there are those who comply and those that resist. I am in no way trying to argue that all educators in Cameroon follow this model, nor am I trying to argue that all teachers in my schooling system comply. The point is to raise the issue and have us think about this personally: Where do you stand as an educator? Is our system much different than the one in the dictatorially run Cameroon? I sincerely hope that I am wrong about the messages I believe candidates are receiving at the faculties of education. My motivation for writing this is that I want the best for our children. To accomplish this, I believe we need confident, competent, professionals that can think critically and creatively, and who are not obedient fearful automatons.

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