School Culture

by

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In 1980 Miles Myers, then administrative director of the Bay Area Writing Project, wrote “The Problem of Teacher Authority” for The Quarterly. In this article he examined the nervous relationship between classroom teachers and university researchers. Myers made the claim that teacher authority must be based on the special knowledge gained by day-to-day experience working in the schools, an experience not generally available to university researchers. We excerpt from this article some of these school understandings accessible primarily to those regularly on the scene. Myers is now executive director of the National Council of Teachers of English.

School has a culture all its own, and curriculum theorists ignore it at their peril. Grades and points are one example. Students who have internalized the school culture want grades and, if possible, points. For such questions as “Do I get a grade on this? What is it worth?” and “How long should it be?” teachers need ready answers:

“Yes, it will be graded by me or one of your peers. This assignment is worth twenty-three points, seven more than yesterday’s. And how long? Fold your paper in half. Notice where the crease appears. Write to there in the next ten minutes.”

To argue that the questions are absurd and should be ignored or that teachers should give up grades and give free, more open assignments is to ask many teachers to change the culture of their schools and communities. For many parents who already doubt the concern of teachers for their children, a teacher’s claim “I don’t give grades” is another way of saying, “I don’t much care what the students do.” And for many students, a teacher’s instruction to “write on whatever you want, as long or as short as you want to make it,” creates not liberation, but a sickening sense of existential nausea. Such students do not know what to do until the teacher assigns a topic, rigid and specific:

“Everyone will write 423 words on why Oakland High School is the most beautiful spot on God’s green earth.”

At that instant nine out of ten will have a topic — some will affirm, some oppose, and the rest will realize that they want to do something else, knowing this only after the teacher has told them what they must do.

Or take directions. Curriculum researchers often tell us to give clear and complete directions so that students understand what to do. For example, in a Phi Delta Kappan article (“News, Notes, and Quotes,” May-June 1977), Arthur L. Costa says, “Research by Kounin (1970) and Dalis (1970) indicates that the clarity of the teacher’s directions affects the student’s behavior. If the directions are confusing, incomplete, or too complex, the students will not be able to focus properly on the learning activity, and the chances for deviance will increase. Learning objectives must be stated precisely...” In the culture of the school, the theory of clear directions is often doomed. No matter how clear, no matter how complete, once the teacher says, “Get started,” the hands go up: “What do we do?” Has the teacher failed to give clear and complete directions? No. The students want the individual attention of the teacher explaining one-to-one. In such a situation, teachers might be better advised to mumble something...
unintelligible, say clearly, "Get started," wait a minute for the hands to go up, and start around the room.

Or spelling tests. Research may tell us that they don’t improve spelling very much, but for many classrooms spelling tests are like a mantra. The world has a center after all. Here is something we know is English. Here is something with a definite beginning, middle, and end — all within a short time span. The world, alas, has recognizable order. Many junior high teachers know that the routine of a spelling test helps calm students, helps center them, making more complicated lessons possible.

Or books. Researchers often treat books as if they were only texts to be read. In schools, books are as much emblems, part of the uniform of school, as they are texts to be read. Many students desire books because they are part of the school uniform, and some students consider it a status symbol to be carrying a book which the students cannot read. An objective rule about readable texts is bound to be destructive to some subjectively reasonable beliefs understood by teachers.

The model of the Bay Area Writing Project is not just a way of improving the teaching of writing. It is a staff development model which recognizes both the authority of researchers for research and the authority of teachers for practice, and which attempts to establish a new relationship between universities and the K-12 teaching profession and a new integration of theory and practice.

**Afterword**

After revisiting this selection, I find that it still represents my thinking about the relationship between the university and the Bay Area Writing Project, between university researchers and classroom teachers. I have been keeping notes on other cultural maxims or artifacts which teachers and university researchers see differently, and have now reached 17. Of course, K-12 classroom teachers should not expect university researchers to write K-12 lesson plans or even to be relevant to K-12 teaching. When I was teaching high school, I read university research articles on literature, grammar, composition, language learning, and so forth because I found those articles added to my personal growth. And Berkeley has great contributors in all of these areas. My own personal growth and education always came in handy when I was trying to think clearly about my teaching and my school (Oakland High School, Castlemont High School). When I wanted direct help with my teaching, I turned to fellow teachers who had a thoughtful, inquiring spirit about their own practices.

I, also, still believe that the best school reform would be the institutionalization of teacher research and inquiry at each K-12 school site. What does institutionalizing inquiry mean? For one thing, it means that teachers would not leave accountability and assessment to professional evaluators. Teachers themselves could develop assessments — otherwise known as instruments for data collection — for reporting to the public what their school sites are accomplishing. I remain perplexed by those who are willing to grade students but who are not willing to develop better ways to report to the public what is happening in K-12 schools.

Institutionalizing inquiry also means that we are willing to collect data about the content of what we teach and to have a collective discussion about whether the content we teach represents our best collective thinking about schooling. Because students are mandated to attend particular schools, public bodies are asking for descriptions of the curriculum content teachers teach. This discussion at the national, state, and school site level is called the standards discussion. There are teachers who wish to leave this discussion to policy makers, fearing that a discussion of this kind at any level will lead to mandates beyond those affecting students. Of course, a little institutional inquiry will reveal very clearly the mandates that already exist — requirements for graduation, for instance. I am puzzled by those who wish to do teacher research and, at the same time, who wish not to have a standards investigation. These pervasive attitudes toward assessment and standards represent serious obstacles to any effort to institutionalize inquiry in K-12 schools and to enhance the moral and intellectual authority of K-12 classroom teachers. Teachers who have established their moral and intellectual authority can free themselves from brain-numbing routine and demand the time to do professional work.