

Weapons of Mass Distortion: A Narrative

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Abstract:

In this personal narrative I contend that the traditional conventions of schooling can distort and mislead us in mainstream schools and universities. The long-term consequences of these practices have paved the way for the corporate curriculum's privatization agenda for what Illich (1971) hailed as the 'hidden curriculum' of our consumer-based society.

Introduction:

Two decades after WWII, between 1967 and 1974, teacher training was radically revamped through the coordinated efforts of important private foundations, select universities, think-tanks, and government agencies, encouraged by major global corporations... Benjamin Bloom's multi-volume *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*... this work impacted every school in America. Bloom's massive effort is the work of a genuine academic madman, constituting, in his own words, "a tool to classify the ways individuals are to act, think and feel as the result of some unit of instruction." It's the "think and feel" part that gives the game away. Simple fascism would have stopped at *action*, but as Orwell warned in *1984*, something deeper than fascism is happening (Gatto, 2009, p. 4).

After reading Gatto's book, *Weapons of Mass Instruction (2009)*, I became cognizant that in many faculties of education we still teach precarious theories such as Bloom's to pre-service teachers without asking ourselves why? Have we internalized the institutional gaze and now unconsciously function as part of the forced schooling agenda without knowing it? Schooling achieves the economic and social order objectives of the radically dumbed-down curriculum.

In the same way, after watching Sir Ken Robinson's popular online TED Conference talk on how schools kill creativity, I was reminded that:

Now our education system is predicated on the idea of academic ability and there's a reason; the whole system was invented round the world there were no public systems of education really before the 19th Century, they all came into being to meet the needs of industrialism. So the hierarchy is reasoned on two ideas; number one, that the most useful subjects for work are at the top. So you had probably steered benignly away from things at school when you were a

kid, things you liked on the grounds that you would never get a job doing that. Is that right? Don't do music you are not going to be a musician. Don't do art, because you won't be an artist. Benign advice. Now profoundly mistaken (Robinson, 2006).

In this personal narrative I would like to share how educational institutions can “dumb us down” to conform to the established social order as Gatto (2005) suggests. When I was a student in high school in the mid 1990's, I attended a new summer school program. This was a special summer technology program where I was paid to earn academic credit; this (to my knowledge) was the first time the government paid children to go to school in the summer. As a ‘product’ of the mainstream education system, I was confused about what democracy really meant, as Battistoni states:

Moreover, the fact that many schools give grades for “citizenship” based on a student's neatness, politeness, submission of homework on time, and passive obedience to school rules suggests that our educators have forgotten what it means to be a democratic citizen (Battistoni, 1985, p. 5).

For most of my life, I believed that universities were places of higher learning. My upbringing had taught me that universities valued open learning and did not conform to the narrow view of education that I experienced in a mainstream high school. Unfortunately, my university classes during my B.A. degree mainly focused on just covering material and memorizing facts. The routine of listening to three-hour lectures, reading textbooks, writing essays and exams, rarely allowed me to pursue my own interests.

When I became a classroom teacher in a mainstream school, I did not drink the conformity Kool-Aid (e.g. I made the shift away from teaching pre-fabricated unit plans) and I believed that not being overtly obedient, provided me an alternative to becoming part of the institutionalized schooling schema (Pitt & Kirkwood, 2010, p. 3). My goal was to ensure that my students did not have the same dreadful experiences that I had as a mainstream school student. Later, when I began teaching at a university, I endeavoured not to pass along the same mind-numbing ideology to my students.

As a university professor I am a ‘product’ of the mainstream education system as Sir Ken Robinson's online TED Conference talk encapsulates:

If you were to visit education as an alien and say, ‘what is it for? Public education’. I think you'd have to conclude, if you look at the output... Who really succeeds? Who does everything they should? Who gets all the Brownie points? Who are the winners? I think you'd have to conclude the whole purpose of public education, throughout the world, is to

produce university professors, isn't it? They're the people who come out the top and I used to be one, so there! You know, and I like university professors, but, you know, we shouldn't hold them up as the high water mark of all human achievement. They're just a form of life, you know, another form of life. But they're rather curious and I say this out of affection for them. There's something curious about professors in my experience, not all of them, but typically they live in their heads. They live up there and slightly to one side. They're disembodied, you know, in a kind of literal way. You know, they look upon their body as a form of transport for their heads. You know, it's... don't they? It's a way of getting their heads to meetings. If you want real evidence of out of body experiences, by the way, get yourself along to a residential conference of senior academics and pop into the discotheque on the final night. And there you will see it; grown men and women writhing uncontrollably off the beat, waiting to end so that they can go home and write a paper about it (Robinson, 2006).

During my first year of university teaching I advocated for pre-service teachers that it did not matter if the lesson plan was "textbook perfect." I believed that it was more important to prepare pre-service teachers to think about the needs of the learners first, rather than as an afterthought of how to deliver the curriculum content. I read Parker Palmer's 1998 book entitled "The Courage to Teach" to my classes and encouraged that good lesson plans don't always equate to good teaching. I wanted students to find their own voice, rather than stick to these rigid lesson blueprints. As Palmer indicates:

Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher...in every class I teach, my ability to connect with my students, and to connect them with the subject, depends less on the methods I use than on the degree to which I know and trust my selfhood...bad teachers distance themselves from the subject they are teaching – and in the process, from their students (Palmer, 1998, 10-11).

I wanted students to be independent thinkers and not just producers of copious content. I tried to build creativity into every class, such as using drama and dance. I wanted pre-service teachers to engage in discussions about the important issues facing mainstream schools (e.g. homophobia, gender and equity, aboriginal rights, and so on). I suggested that our maltreatment of homosexuals today has many parallels with the discrimination experienced by black people during the 1960's in the southern United States. As an example, I said that it is common today to hear both children and adults in mainstream schools put people and things down by saying "That's gay" or "That's so gay." My attempt to correct these social wrongs did not succeed as many people believe that mainstream schools are wonderful places for children. I also discussed the importance of topics such as self-fulfilling prophecy or Pygmalion Theory and how the mainstream school staffroom discourse can be damaging to teachers and students (Pitt & Kirkwood, 2009).

I would not be surprised to learn that many future teachers do not want to be active learners, rather they desire to be passive receivers of content in lectures and PowerPoint presentations as they have done during their previous degrees before entering teacher education programs. I graded my students fairly but expected that they would complete all the required tasks. Part of the lore of “Teacher’s College” is that everyone earns five out of five or ten out of ten on each and every assignment. There is a colossal sense of entitlement in many university students who give the impression that they are knowledgeable about many topics as evidenced in the popular literature. As Gatto indicates:

When they come of age, they are certain they must know something because their degrees and licenses say they do. They remain so convinced until an unexpectedly brutal divorce, a corporate downsizing in midlife, or panic attacks of meaninglessness upset the precarious balance of their incomplete humanity, their stillborn adult lives (Gatto, 2009, p. 86).

Student evaluations of faculty (SEF) forms are biased in that university students rate the instructor based on criteria such as “ensured that my work was graded in a fair and consistent manner” which students often interpret as, “did my instructor give me a high mark?” Grade inflation is a major problem in Canadian universities (Cote, 2007; Girard, 2007).

Correspondingly Cote and Allahar; authors of *The Ivory Tower Blues: A University System In Crisis*, draw attention to the failure of universities:

Where many students are more interested in the piece of paper they get at the end of their programs than in the intellectual journey along the way, where professors are cowed into watering down courses and bumping up grades, and where universities are run like corporations hawking mass-produced degrees which are increasingly in demand but increasingly meaningless. The consequences, the authors argue, are a disengaged student body, disillusioned faculty and a glut of bachelor-degree-holding graduates with unrealistically lofty aspirations in for a shock when they land in a job market fuelled by "credentialism" and plagued by under-employment (National Post, April 28, 2007).

During this first year teaching at a university, I thought that I was doing a great job teaching at “this level” because I believed that universities should be places where freedom of thought and speech existed. I was surprised when I received my student course evaluations at the end of my first year. In addition, when I was rehired midway through that initial year, many of the comments I received from the re-hiring committee were positive. For example, I told the committee that I didn’t lecture to my students and showed them some multimedia examples of the active student-directed learning that was occurring. When the results of the course

evaluations were in, I was then told that my scores would need to improve (to a minimum of 4.0 or higher out of 5) if I wanted to have a career in a university. I realized that some educational institutions are not fond of those who challenge the existing state of affairs as Gatto indicates:

During my thirteenth year as a schoolteacher in Community School District Three, Manhattan, after teaching in all five secondary schools in the district and crossing swords with one professional administrator after another as they strove to rid themselves of me; after having my licence suspended twice for insubordination and covertly terminated once while I was on medical leave of absence...(Gatto, 2009, p. 83).

My overall course evaluations during my first year resulted in a score of 3.36 out of 5. During this year, I had one class evaluate me at 2.80, while my two other classes rated me at 3.61 and 3.64 in that order. Not surprisingly, the section that rated me at 2.80 had a group of students who told me on my feedback forms that they did not like being taught by someone as young as me (I was 28 years old then); they wanted a veteran teacher and some even indicated that a female would be better suited for preparing teachers at the primary level. It is noteworthy that on average, the majority of the students in the program I teach are also female. Das and Das (2001) conducted a study in Atlantic Canada which found that university students make gender-role judgments, in that they associate professors who are of the same gender (as they are) as being the best professor. The course itself (e.g. assignments and course content) was rated at 3.50 out of 5, the course textbook was rated at 2.97 out of 5.

The next year I was evaluated by my students at a rating of 4.70 out of 5. The exact same course (e.g. assignments and course content) was rated at 4.50 out of 5, and the same course textbook was rated at 4.03 out of 5. Why did my scores increase by almost 30 percent? Why did the course rating increase? Why did the textbook rating increase for the exact same book? The answers to these questions I will discuss later.

The next year I was evaluated by my students at a rating of 4.85 out of 5, a slightly higher score compared to the year before. The same course was rated at 4.69 out of 5, and the same course textbook was rated at 4.37 out of 5. How did I increase my teaching scores from the first year?

In order to increase my scores, I looked at the data gathered by the university from the student evaluations of faculty (SEF). The data relates to the author (me) and is secondary data without identifiers and the original participants provided the information for the purpose of improving these ratings. I decided that an increase in my SEF, did not completely correspond

with an improvement in my teaching. I determined that SEF had more to do with popularity (e.g., status & reputation) than teaching. I had to dress the part of the professor to fit the “tweed jacket” stereotype. I could no longer be comfortable wearing khaki pants and a golf shirt, instead I wore the professor costume: dress pants, a sport jacket, and a tie with a full ‘Windsor Knot’ each day to add the appearance of age and avoid any discrimination about being younger than most of my colleagues. I also had to distance myself from my students, SEF feedback forms said they didn’t want a friend they wanted a professor. I was also told to tell old “war stories” as this is what the students want to hear. I responded to student emails almost immediately, day or night, weekends, and holidays included. In our technologically based society of MSN, Facebook and Twitter, today students want an “instant” reply. I lectured for each class and provided all my lecture notes and PowerPoint presentations in advance during the first class. This was a shift away from integrating active student-directed learning. I memorized the dogma of the Education Ministry, as I had observed that many considered this to be valuable knowledge. I taught lesson planning in an unpretentious manner. As Ricci indicates:

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 beginning teachers to do it, we are preparing them for the task of doing what you are told even if it does not contribute to making them a more successful teacher. (Ricci, 2005, p.8).

Course evaluations of faculty are not the golden halo that represents effective university teaching; They are no different than the customer ‘McSatisfaction’ cards completed at the ‘golden arches’ and should not be used for hiring faculty as long as higher education is considered a commodity to be purchased by paying tuition fees. Scriven suggests that:

Most forms, when used in the most common ways, are invalid as a basis for personnel action. For example, many forms to make personnel decisions ask questions that may influence the respondent by mentioning extraneous and potentially prejudicial material (i.e. questions about the teacher’s personality or the appeal of the subject matter). Scriven (1995, p. 2).

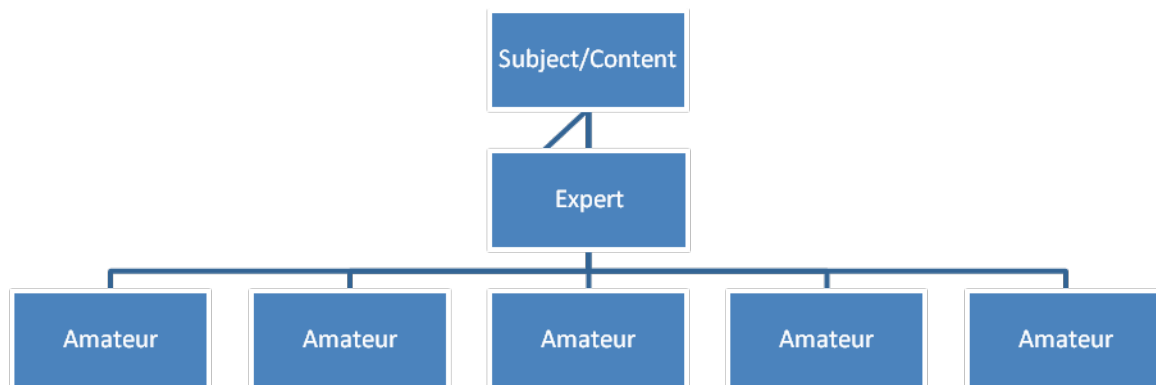
Furthermore, Ackerman, Gross, and Vigneron (2009, p. 18) suggest that “it is better not to rely on a single source of information as evidence of teaching effectiveness.” Not surprisingly, SEF are actually doing what they are intended to do, i.e., to hire faculty who will provide the commodity of education by dumbing-down the curriculum for the intended audience. Corporate involvement in universities is a dominant force facing universities. The

attitudes of corporations have been and continue to be adopted by universities in both teaching and research. The funding cutbacks to universities make these institutions easy prey for the private sector and the implementation of the corporate curriculum (Clarke, T., & Dopp, 2005, p. 162). Educational institutions of higher learning create a culture of fear amongst contingent faculty and tenure-track faculty who rely on enhanced SEF for job security. This “culture of fear exists” from kindergarten to graduate studies in university as Palmer suggests:

From grade school on, education is a fearful enterprise. As a student, I was in too many classrooms riddled with fear, the fear that leads many children, born with a love of learning, to hate the idea of school...Academic institutions offer myriad ways to protect ourselves from the threat of a live encounter...To avoid a live encounter with students, teachers hide behind their podiums, their credentials, their power. To avoid a live encounter with one another, faculty can hide behind their academic specialities (Palmer, 1998, 36-37).

Palmer illustrates the “mythical but dominant model” of unconscious objectivism traditionally used in educational institutions as shown below:

Figure 1. An adaptation of Palmer’s The Objectivist Myth of Knowing (1998, p.100)



The sense of entitlement is mammoth amongst the vast majority of today’s society; by comparison many university students also believe that education is the same as any other commodity and because they have paid tuition fees that they have literally purchased a degree.

SEF are a personification of the image of buying a university education. When institutions utilize customer satisfaction surveys as the epitome of teacher excellence, this propagates the problems facing mainstream schools today. Universities spend countless dollars marketing degree programs, while selling the mantra that university graduates earn more money than those who do not attend universities and colleges.

When teachers (pre-service and practicing) are misinformed, the consequence for mainstream schools is a catastrophic process of labelling, as Gatto states:

and “special ed.” (These last kids had a cash value to the school three times higher than that of the others, providing a genuine incentive to find fatal defects where none existed)...Hector belonged to the doomed category called “mainstream,” it-self further divided into subcategories labelled A, B, C, and D. Worst of the worst, above special ed, was mainstream D. This is where Hector reported. Since special ed was a life sentence of ostracism and humiliation at the hands of one’s peers (Gatto, 2009, p. 88).

Further, Sir Ken Robinson’s TED talk tells the story of Julian Lynn (the choreographer for *Cats* and *Phantom of the Opera*) would not have succeeded in today’s mainstream schools:

She eventually graduated from the Royal Ballet School and founded her own company; the Julian Lynn Dance Company, met Andrew Lloyd Weber. She has been responsible for some of the most successful musical theatre productions in history. She has given pleasure to millions and she’s a multi-millionaire. Somebody else might have put her on medication and told her to calm down (Robinson, 2006).

Conclusion:

People often want to hold on to the existing practices and conventions because they make many people feel safe and comfortable, however, the traditions established through mainstream schooling are harmful to children. A study conducted by Ladd and Linderholm (2008, p. 229-241), investigated pre-service teachers’ perceptions and inherent attitudes surrounding school grading labels. Pre-service teachers were influenced by interpretations presented to them before viewing the exact same video of classrooms labelled as “A,” “F,” or “typical” supposedly based on the data from standardized test scores. This study indicated that pre-service teachers who thought that they were observing a video of an “F” classroom stated more negative and fewer positive comments when viewing a video of an “F” classroom compared to an “A” classroom. Therefore, negative inherent attitudes clearly biased pre-service teachers’ perceptions regarding the exact same observable classroom. The findings of this study are significant, since pre-service teachers attitudes can be erroneous. Pre-service teachers perceptions in the form of SEF are used by universities to hire and fire faculty, and

as such impact the preparation program that future teachers receive before they enter the classroom and begin working with children.

During a recent TED Conference in February 2009, billionaire Bill Gates (a college dropout), highlighted some significant problems facing mainstream schools in the United States:

But even more concerning is the education that the balance of people are getting. Not only has that been weak; it's getting weaker... Over 30 percent of kids never finish high school... For minority kids, it's over 50 percent. And even if you graduate from high school, if you're low-income, you have less than a 25 percent chance of ever completing a college degree. If you're low-income in the United States, you have a higher chance of going to jail than you do of getting a four-year degree (Gates, 2009).

The problems facing mainstream schools and universities can be lessened by questioning our practices, as Holt suggests "Do we do something because we want to help children and can see that what we are doing is helping them? Or do we do it because it is inexpensive or convenient for schools, teachers, administrators?" (Holt, 1964, p. 230). Teaching whether it be in a mainstream elementary, secondary school, or university cannot be reduced to simple ratings and "how to" guides.

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