

The Six-Lesson Schoolteacher

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New York State Teacher of the Year, 1991

Call me Mr. Gatto, please. Twenty-six years ago, having nothing better to do, I tried my hand at schoolteaching. My license certifies me as an instructor of English language and literature, but that isn't what I do at all. What I teach is school, and I win awards doing it.

Teaching means many different things, but six lessons are common to schoolteaching from Harlem to Hollywood. You pay for these lessons in more ways than you can imagine, so you might as well know what they are:

The first lesson I teach is: "Stay in the class where you belong." I don't know who decides that my kids belong there but that's not my business. The children are numbered so that if any get away they can be returned to the right class. Over the years the variety of ways children are numbered has increased dramatically, until it is hard to see the human being under the burden of the numbers each carries. Numbering children is a big and very profitable business, though what the business is designed to accomplish is elusive.

In any case, again, that's not my business. My job is to make the kids like it -- being locked in together, I mean -- or at the minimum, endure it. If things go well, the kids can't imagine themselves anywhere else; they envy and fear the better classes and have contempt for the dumber classes. So the class mostly keeps itself in good marching order. That's the real lesson of any rigged competition like school. You come to know your place.

Nevertheless, in spite of the overall blueprint, I make an effort to urge children to higher levels of test success, promising eventual transfer from the lower-level class as a reward. I insinuate that the day will come when an employer will hire them on the basis of test scores, even though my own experience is that employers are (rightly) indifferent to such things. I never lie outright, but I've come to see that truth and [school] teaching are incompatible.

The lesson of numbered classes is that there is no way out of your class except by magic. Until that happens you must stay where you are put.

The second lesson I teach kids is to turn on and off like a light switch. I demand that they become totally involved in my lessons, jumping up and down in their seats with anticipation, competing vigorously with each other for my favor. But when the bell rings I insist that they drop the work at once and proceed quickly to the next work station. Nothing important is ever finished in my class, nor in any other class I know of.

The lesson of bells is that no work is worth finishing, so why care too deeply about anything? Bells are the secret logic of school time; their argument is inexorable; bells destroy past and future, converting every interval into a sameness, as an abstract map makes every living mountain and river the same even though they are not. Bells inoculate each undertaking with indifference.

The third lesson I teach you is to surrender your will to a predestined chain of command. Rights may be granted or withheld, by authority, without appeal. As a schoolteacher I intervene in many personal decisions, issuing a Pass for those I deem legitimate, or initiating a disciplinary confrontation for behavior that threatens my control. My judgments come thick and fast, because individuality is trying constantly to assert itself in my classroom. Individuality is a curse to all systems of classification, a contradiction of class theory.

Here are some common ways it shows up: children sneak away for a private moment in the toilet on the pretext of moving their bowels; they trick me out of a private instant in the hallway on the grounds that they need water. Sometimes free will appears right in front of me in children angry, depressed or exhilarated by things outside my ken. Rights in such things cannot exist for schoolteachers; only privileges, which can be withdrawn, exist.

The fourth lesson I teach is that only I determine what curriculum you will study (rather, I enforce decisions transmitted by the people who pay me). This power lets me separate good kids from bad kids instantly. Good kids do the tasks I appoint with a minimum of conflict and a decent show of enthusiasm. Of the millions of things of value to learn, I decide what few we have time for. The choices are mine. Curiosity has no important place in my work, only conformity.

Bad kids fight against this, of course, trying openly or covertly to make decisions for themselves about what they will learn. How can we allow that and survive as schoolteachers? Fortunately there are procedures to break the will of those who resist.

This is another way I teach the lesson of dependency. Good people wait for a teacher to tell them what to do. This is the most important lesson of all, that we must wait for other people, better trained than ourselves, to make the meanings of our lives. It is no exaggeration to say that our entire economy depends upon this lesson being learned. Think of what would fall apart if kids weren't trained in the dependency lesson: The social-service businesses could hardly survive, including the fast-growing counseling industry; commercial entertainment of all sorts, along with television, would wither if people remembered how to make their own fun; the food services, restaurants and prepared-food warehouses would shrink if people returned to making their own meals rather than depending on strangers to cook for them. Much of modern law, medicine, and engineering would go too -- the clothing business as well -- unless a guaranteed supply of helpless people poured out of our schools each year. We've built a way of life that depends on people doing what they are told because they don't know any other way. For God's sake, let's not rock that boat!

In lesson five I teach that your self-respect should depend on an observer's measure of your worth. My kids are constantly evaluated and judged. A monthly report, impressive in its precision, is sent into students' homes to spread approval or to mark exactly -- down to a single percentage point -- how dissatisfied with their children parents should be. Although some people might be surprised how little time or reflection goes into making up these records, the cumulative weight of the objective- seeming documents establishes a profile of defect which compels a child to arrive at a certain decisions about himself and his future based on the casual judgment of strangers.

Self-evaluation -- the staple of every major philosophical system that ever appeared on the planet -- is never a factor in these things. The lesson of report cards, grades, and tests is that children should not trust themselves or their parents, but must rely on the evaluation of certified officials. People need to be told what they are worth.

In lesson six I teach children that they are being watched. I keep each student under constant surveillance and so do my colleagues. There are no private spaces for children; there is no private time. Class change lasts 300 seconds to keep promiscuous fraternization at low levels. Students are encouraged to tattle on each other, even to tattle on their parents. Of course I encourage parents to file their own child's waywardness, too.

I assign "homework" so that this surveillance extends into the household, where students might otherwise use the time to learn something unauthorized, perhaps from a father or mother, or by apprenticing to some wiser person in the neighborhood.

The lesson of constant surveillance is that no one can be trusted, that privacy is not legitimate. Surveillance is an ancient urgency among certain influential thinkers; it was a central prescription set down by Calvin in the Institutes, by Plato in the Republic, by Hobbes, by Comte, by Francis Bacon. All these childless men discovered the same thing: Children must be closely watched if you want to keep a society under central control.

It is the great triumph of schooling that among even the best of my fellow teachers, and among even the best parents, there is only a small number who can imagine a different way to do things. Yet only a very few lifetimes ago things were different in the United States: originality and variety were common currency; our freedom from regimentation made us the miracle of the world; social class boundaries were relatively easy to cross; our citizenry was marvelously confident, inventive, and able to do many things independently, to think for themselves. We were something, all by ourselves, as individuals.

It only takes about 50 contact hours to transmit basic literacy and math skills well enough that kids can be self-teachers from then on. The cry for "basic skills" practice is a smokescreen behind which schools pre-empt the time of children for twelve years and teach them the six lessons I've just taught you.

We've had a society increasingly under central control in the United States since just before the Civil War: the lives we lead, the clothes we wear, the food we eat, and the green highway signs we drive by from coast to coast are the products of this central control. So, too, I think, are the epidemics of drugs, suicide, divorce, violence, cruelty, and the hardening of class into caste in the U.S., products of the dehumanization of our lives, the lessening of individual and family importance that central control imposes.

Without a fully active role in community life you cannot develop into a complete human being. Aristotle taught that. Surely he was right; look around you or look in the mirror: that is the demonstration.

"School" is an essential support system for a vision of social engineering that condemns most people to be subordinate stones in a pyramid that narrows to a control point as it ascends. "School" is an artifice which makes such a pyramidal social order seem inevitable (although such a premise is a fundamental betrayal of the American Revolution). In colonial days and through the period of the early Republic we had no schools to speak of. And yet the promise of democracy was beginning to be realized. We turned our backs on this promise by bringing to life the ancient dream of Egypt: compulsory training in subordination for everybody. Compulsory schooling was the secret Plato reluctantly transmitted in the Republic when he laid down the plans for total state control of human life.

The current debate about whether we should have a national curriculum is phony; we already have one, locked up in the six lessons I've told you about and a few more I've spared you. This curriculum produces moral and intellectual paralysis, and no curriculum of content will be sufficient to reverse its bad effects. What is under discussion is a great irrelevancy.

None of this is inevitable, you know. None of it is impregnable to change. We do have a choice in how we bring up young people; there is no right way. There is no "international competition" that compels our existence, difficult as it is to even think about in the face of a constant media barrage of myth to the contrary. In every important material respect our nation is self-sufficient. If we gained a non-material philosophy that found meaning where it is genuinely located -- in families, friends, the passage of seasons, in nature, in simple ceremonies and rituals, in curiosity, generosity, compassion, and service to others, in a decent independence and privacy -- then we would be truly self-sufficient.

How did these awful places, these "schools", come about? As we know them, they are a product of the two "Red Scares" of 1848 and 1919, when powerful interests feared a revolution among our industrial poor, and partly they are the result of the revulsion with which old-line families regarded the waves of Celtic, Slavic, and Latin immigration -- and the Catholic religion -- after 1845. And certainly a third contributing cause can be found in the revulsion with which these same families regarded the free movement of Africans through the society after the Civil War.

Look again at the six lessons of school. This is training for permanent underclasses, people who are to be deprived forever of finding the center of their own special genius. And it is training shaken loose from its original logic: to regulate the poor. Since the 1920s the growth of the well-articulated school bureaucracy, and the less visible growth of a horde of industries that profit from schooling exactly as it is, have enlarged schooling's original grasp to seize the sons and daughters of the middle class.

Is it any wonder Socrates was outraged at the accusation that he took money to teach? Even then, philosophers saw clearly the inevitable direction the professionalization of teaching would take, pre-empting the teaching function that belongs to all in a healthy community; belongs, indeed, most clearly to yourself, since nobody else cares as much about your destiny. Professional teaching tends to another serious error. It makes things that are inherently easy to learn, like reading, writing, and arithmetic, difficult -- by insisting they be taught by pedagogical procedures.

With lessons like the ones I teach day after day, is it any wonder we have the national crisis we face today? Young people indifferent to the adult world and to the future; indifferent to almost everything except the diversion of toys and violence? Rich or poor, schoolchildren cannot concentrate on anything for very long. They have a poor sense of time past and to come; they are mistrustful of intimacy (like the children of divorce they really are); they hate solitude, are cruel, materialistic, dependent, passive, violent, timid in the face of the unexpected, addicted to distraction.

All the peripheral tendencies of childhood are magnified to a grotesque extent by schooling, whose hidden curriculum prevents effective personality development. Indeed, without exploiting the fearfulness, selfishness, and inexperience of children our schools could not survive at all, nor could I as a certified schoolteacher.

"Critical thinking" is a term we hear frequently these days as a form of training which will herald a new day in mass schooling. It certainly will, if it ever happens. No common school that actually dared teach the use of dialectic, heuristic, and other tools of free minds could last a year without being torn to pieces.

Institutional schoolteachers are destructive to children's development. Nobody survives the Six-Lesson Curriculum unscathed, not even the instructors. The method is deeply and profoundly anti-educational. No tinkering will fix it. In one of the great ironies of human affairs, the massive rethinking that schools require would cost so much less than we are spending now that it is not likely to happen. First and foremost, the business I am in is a jobs project and a contract-letting agency. We cannot afford to save money, not even to help children.

At the pass we've come to historically, and after 26 years of teaching, I must conclude that one of the only alternatives on the horizon for most families is to teach their own children at home. Small, de-institutionalized schools are another. Some form of free-market system for public schooling is the likeliest place to look for answers. But the near impossibility of these things for the shattered families of the poor, and for too many on the fringes of the economic middle class, foretell that the disaster of Six-Lesson Schools is likely to continue.

After an adult lifetime spent in teaching school I believe the method of schooling is the only real content it has. Don't be fooled into thinking that good curricula or good equipment or good teachers are the critical determinants of your son and daughter's schooltime. All the pathologies we've considered come about in large measure because the lessons of school prevent children from keeping important appointments with themselves and their families, to learn lessons in self-motivation, perseverance, self-reliance, courage, dignity and love -- and, of course, lessons in service to others, which are among the key lessons of home life.

Thirty years ago these things could still be learned in the time left after school. But television has eaten most of that time, and a combination of television and the stresses peculiar to two-income or single-parent families have swallowed up most of what used to be family time. Our kids have no time left to grow up fully human, and only thin-soil wastelands to do it in.

A future is rushing down upon our culture which will insist that all of us learn the wisdom of non-material experience; this future will demand, as the price of survival, that we follow a pace of natural life economical in material cost. These lessons cannot be learned in schools as they are. School is like starting life with a 12-year jail sentence in which bad habits are the only curriculum truly learned. I teach school and win awards doing it. I should know.

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