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Schools and Stories:

Some Rambling Thoughts towards an Argument for Revisiting Neil Postman

The first time I did it, or at least my first memory of doing it, I was being snarky. *But why do I have to learn this?* I intended to derail my 7th grade math class a bit, swing the spotlight over to me, maybe say something clever and get the girl two seats in front of me to smile at me. “You all know that this will be on the test. Do not interrupt.” Game over. Obviously not the first time the teacher heard that one.

I would go on to ask that same question of almost every teacher I would have for the rest of my mandatory K-12 schooling, but never again did I ask it to waste time. I wanted to know the answer. Some teachers humored me, a few individuals took me seriously, but the majority parroted my 7th grade teacher. The only thing that changed was the “the test” evolved into “the SATs” and “your GPA.”

But the story of that day doesn't end there. I was 12 years old; I sought laughter with my disruptions, and by this time, I had made quite a career out of them. Usually, I went for something more clever, but sometimes the drudgery wears you down and all you want is an interruption, so there it was, *But why do I have to learn this?*

Instead of laughter, I got groans. I did succeed in getting the attention of the girl two seats in front of me. She flipped her middle finger at me and told me to shut-up because she was trying to learn.

Wait. Learn what?

In that unintentional self-reflection, the primordial kindling of my animal brain was singed by the sparks of Reason. That is to say, I fully comprehended that we were being taught how to do something with fractions, but what are we actually learning in this class?

Here's what I learned in that fraction of a second. First, the teacher either did not know or did not care why this material should be taught. Second, I asked why *I* should learn, to which she gave a response that dismissed my individuality and dissolved me into the rest of the class. Third, questions are interruptions, and they are not welcome. We were learning to sit still, do as we were told, and regurgitate what we're asked to when, and only when, we're told to.

Needless to say, my 12 year old brain did not know what to do with those thoughts. I shut-up as I was told, got back to scribbling fractions, and most likely bombed whatever test we took. But they never fully left me. Over time, exploring these questions and their many branches eventually brought me to their root, which I believe to be the central and predominant question of any philosophy of education: Why do schools exist?

I channel that pesky 12 year old all over again, but now the stakes are higher. I have spent two years "teaching" (long story) and I am in graduate school to purchase a piece of paper that implies I am qualified to attempt to educate the latest wave of youth. In our courses, we've discussed the sociological and economic factors that surround and sometimes stifle students and schools; we've checked our privilege in various ways, including the privilege to check one's privilege; we've said the words "social justice" in a dazzling array of contexts. It's not enough for me. The question still nags. I ask it: why do schools exist?

No pretenses this time, no desire for distraction or attention, just a simple question.

For now, I will leave to the reader's imagination the debate that ensued. We must similarly use our imaginations to hear the question debated by today's school reformers, because almost no one is asking it. The contemporary debate about schools is a series of bombastic broadsides centered on standards, choice, testing, and evaluation. These are not unimportant, but in the absence of an answer to the question above, they are pointless—and perhaps dangerous.

The absence of philosophy from the typical school of education and teacher training program means that teachers trained in the latest techniques for classroom management, reading comprehension, and numeracy are being placed into classrooms unprepared for both that pesky 12 year old kid and the mounting pressure to give an account of themselves and their work that satisfies their own need for meaning and dignity as a human being fully alive as opposed to a cog in an indoctrinating machine.

Some teachers are lucky. I've been lucky my whole life to have circumstances deliver me unto a mentor at my moments of greatest need. On the first day of orientation, crammed with five other new teachers in his still-under-construction office, the principal who hired me plopped down a copy of the first chapter from Neil Postman's *The End of Education* entitled "The Necessity of Gods" in front of us. He asked us to read it and before we would do anything else, we needed to discover what god(s) our classroom served.

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Since it is my belief that Postman's theories hold crucial value for all schools and teachers, I should quickly clarify his use of the word "gods" before its associations overwhelm us. In Postman's argument, small-g god is synonymous with the word narrative; one then might

naturally ask why not just use *that* word and leave the whole “god” business out of this?

Acknowledging the risks, Postman defends the term precisely because of the compelling power and sacredness that are conjured up by the term. The narratives that Postman will discuss are not just stories. They have a purpose:

to direct one’s mind to an idea and... to a story—not any kind of story, but one that tells of origins and envisions a future, a story that constructs ideals, prescribes rules of conduct, provides a source of authority, and, above all, gives a sense of continuity and purpose. A god, in the sense [he] is using it, is the name of a great narrative, one that has sufficient credibility, complexity, and symbolic power to enable one to organize one’s life around it (5-6).

Creating these narratives, asserts Postman, is one of the defining features of our species. We give meaning to work, to suffering, and to ourselves through them. They are at the heart of both group and individual identity, they define and refine moral conduct, and they provide us with a platform from which to explore the unknown. Narratives are necessary to construct meaning in our lives, and this is why the narrative must precede the school. “Without meaning, learning has no purpose. Without a purpose, schools are houses of detention, not attention” (7).

Many technocratic reformers will respond that their initiatives do have purpose.

Improving reading skills, closing the achievement gap, training students for the computer-based jobs of the future; these are noble purposes. They are, and they are also narrow. No one who strives to live a purpose-filled life would be satisfied with these as end goals. No school that defines its purposes only this way is even likely to achieve them. Recall the pesky 12 year old asking what all this is for?

Far more is at stake, however, than the effectiveness of the hundreds of educational reform programs being proposed and implemented around the country. Although I sing his

praises as a philosopher of education, Neil Postman is most remembered for his arguments about the deteriorating effects of mass media on public discourse in his 1985 book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Recently, both Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* and George Orwell's *1984* have risen to the top of best-sellers list. While this surge in interest for these two dystopian novels may reflect an unsettled mood in the present and anxiety about the future, neither one purports to say much about how we arrived at this present. For that, one would be better served by revisiting Postman. In *The Guardian*, Andrew Postman¹ recently wrote an article revisiting his father's most famous work, reminding readers that it was always the hedonistic dystopia of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* that better described the threat to America than the totalitarian visions of Atwood or Orwell.

Although the technology that most preoccupied Neil Postman was television, specifically because of its impact on the value of news, the many parallels to the upheavals brought on by the advent of the internet and social media make his work prescient for its time and startlingly relevant for our own. The latest disruption has placed TVs in every pocket, information on demand, and replaced the old-guard gatekeepers with logic of algorithms. Once thought as a means of uniting the world, the spread of the Internet has sadly exacerbated our divisions and given rise to cultural "bubbles" that proliferate stereotypes and encourage radicalism. Postman worried about the blurring line, now all but obliterated, between news and entertainment. He worried about the an increasing tendency toward individualism that could devastate our capacity for civil discourse. He was deeply suspicious that promises to liberate—from poverty, from boredom—through technology were merely invitations to exchange agency for convenience.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/feb/02/amusing-ourselves-to-death-neil-postman-trump-orwell-huxley>

Huxley's dystopia was the one we should fear, he argued, because it comes about through our consent.

The schools play a central role in the eventual outcome of this human adventure. What needs serious discussion is whether or not a school can, or should, be the place for such a mission. "Our citizens believe in two contradictory reasons for schooling," writes Postman:

One is that schools must teach the young to accept the world as it is, with all of their culture's rules, requirements, constraints, and even prejudices. The other is that the young should be taught to be critical thinkers, so that they become men and women of independent mind, distanced from the conventional wisdom of their own time and with strength and skill enough to change what is wrong (End 60).

Despite how the culture wars make it seem, this is not an either/or proposition. Even a cursory reflection on our own personal experience of education will reveal a mixture of both co-existing. Dig a bit deeper, and we might even discover that the tension between these seemingly contradictory values reveals some of the deepest held truths in our lives. It is necessary, therefore, that we adopt these as the two fixed points between which our narratives will unfold. To callback to two previous books of Postman's, at some points the goal of education will be conservation, at other points, it will be subversion; what is most important is that at all points it takes the shape of a dialogue—between teacher-student, student-student, school-culture.

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In *The End of Education*, Postman proposes five narratives that could serve to answer the question, What are schools for? My hope is that the brief excerpts I provide will encourage teachers to read Postman's full discussion of the narratives in the book.

Recalling the function of the narrative as described on page 4, it might be natural to wonder about the feasibility of building a curriculum around one or all of these narratives. There is a natural interdisciplinary scope to each of the narratives, although it is also possible to see how one might favor a particular subject as it is currently defined in a secondary school. In outlining each of them, Postman is scant on practical details. Yet recall how many teachers recoil with disgust at scripted curriculums and the ugly ongoing battles over standards and curriculum across the country; the lack of instructions in this instance is a virtue.

If what you read is compelling enough, you may find yourself forced to try and test the boundaries of the structures within which you are forced to work and see what happens. If we were able to begin with our reasons for schools, it is quite possible we would not design them the way they are now. If the Sisyphean task of structural reform seems beyond your scope, never doubt the power of influence that one classroom can exert.

Here are the five narratives, with excerpts from Postman providing a brief overview of their scope and focus.

- Spaceship Earth
 - The story of human beings as stewards of the Earth, caretakers of a vulnerable space capsule... the story of Spaceship Earth has the power to bind people. It makes the idea of racism both irrelevant and ridiculous, and it makes clear the interdependence of human beings and their need for solidarity. If any part of the spaceship is poisoned, then all suffer—which is to say that the extinction of the rain forest is not a Brazilian problem; the pollution of the oceans is not a Miami problem; the depletion of the ozone layer is not an Australian problem. It follows from this, of course, that genocide is not a Bosnian problem, hunger not a Somalian problem, political oppression not a Chinese problem. “Never send to know for whom the bell tolls,” wrote John Donne. “It tolls for thee.” If ever there was a narrative to animate that idea, the Earth as our one and only spaceship is it (64-65).

- The Fallen Angel
 - The major theme of the story is that human beings make mistakes. All the time. It is our nature to make mistakes... That we may be mistaken, and probably are, is the meaning of the “fall” in the fallen angel. The meaning of “angel” is that we are capable of correcting our mistakes, provided we proceed without hubris, pride, or dogmatism; provided that we accept our cosmic status as the error-prone species. Therein lies the possibility of our redemption: Knowing that we do not know and cannot know the whole truth, we may move toward it inch by inch by discarding what we know to be false. And then watch the truth move further and further away (67).
 - The most explicit and sophisticated example of how this narrative improves the human condition is, of course, science. This would hardly be worth noting except for the fact that in the popular mind, and certainly in school, science is thought to be something other than a method for correcting our mistakes—namely a source of ultimate truth. Such a belief is, in itself, an instance of the sin of pride, and no self-respecting scientist will admit to holding it... Taking this point of view, we may conclude that science is not physics, biology, or chemistry—is not even a “subject”—but a moral imperative drawn from a larger narrative whose purpose is to give perspective, balance, and humility to learning (68).

- The American Experiment
 - It has the virtues of being largely true, of explaining our past, including our mistakes, of inviting participation in the present, of offering hope for the future. It is a story that does not require the belief that America is superior to all other countries, only that it is unique, youthful, admirable, and opened wide to unfulfilled humane possibilities... I propose, then, the story of America as an experiment, a perpetual and fascinating question mark (71).
 - The American Constitution is not a catechism, but a hypothesis. It is less the law of the land than an expression of the law of the land as it has been understood by various people at different times (71).
 - All arguments have a theme that is made manifest in a series of questions: What is freedom? What are its limits? What is a human being? What are the obligations of citizenship? What is meant by democracy? And so on. Happily, Americans are neither the only nor the first people to argue these questions, which means we have found answers, and may continue to find them, in the analects of Confucius, the commandments of Moses, the dialogues of Plato, the aphorisms of Jesus, the instructions of the Koran, the speeches of Milton, the plays of Shakespeare, the essays of Voltaire, the prophecies of Hegel, the manifestations of Marx, the sermons of Martin Luther King, Jr., and any other source where such questions have been seriously addressed. But which ones are the right answers? We don't

know. There's the rub, and the beauty and the value of the story. So we argue and experiment and complain, and grieve, and rejoice, and argue some more, without end. Which means that in this story we need conceal nothing from ourselves; no shame need endure forever; no accomplishment merits excessive pride. AI is fluid and subject to change, to better arguments, to the results of future experiments (73).

- The Law of Diversity
 - The lesson here is that sameness is the enemy of vitality and creativity. From a practical point of view, we can see this in every field of human activity. Stagnation occurs when nothing new and different comes from outside the system (78).
 - Diversity does not mean the disintegration of standards, is not an argument against standards, does not lead to a chaotic, irresponsible relativism. It is an argument for the growth and malleability of standards, a growth that takes place across time and space and that is given form by differences of gender, religion, and all other categories of humanity. Thus, the story of how language, art, politics, science, and most expressions of human activity have grown, been vitalized and enriched through the intermingling of different ideas is one way to organize learning and to provide the young with a sense of pride in being human (80).

- The Word Weavers/The World Makers
 - One answer that can provide schooling with a profound organizing principle is that we use language to create the world—which is to say, language is not only a vehicle of thought; it is, as Wittgenstein said, also the driver. We go where it leads. We see the world as it permits us to see it (83).
 - There is an inescapable moral dimension to how we use language... language distinguishes between the sacred and the profane, and thereby provides an organization to our moral sense. The profligate use of language is not merely a social offense but a threat to the ways in which we have constructed our notions of good and bad, permissible and impermissible. To use language to defend the indefensible (as George Orwell claimed some of us habitually do), to use language to transform certain human beings into nonpersons, to use language to lie and to blur distinctions, to say more than you know or *can* know, to take the name of the truth in vain—these are offenses against a moral order, and they can, incidentally, be committed with excellent pronunciation or with impeccable grammar and spelling (85).

- To the extent to which any of us is clear about anything, it will be through an awareness of how we use language, how language uses us, and what measures are available to clarify our knowledge of the world we make (87).

The great advantage of placing narratives at the heart of schools is that they are inherently interactive. They allow the teacher and student to participate in making meaning alongside one another and encourage students to engage in conversation with one another, their past, and the larger culture outside the school. They extol the accomplishments of human beings while cautioning against hubris. Each narrative also promotes a shared responsibility for one another, our civic institutions, and our ecosystem. They directly attack the prevailing cultural forces that work to isolate and separate us by giving us all roles in a single story.

At heart, Postman is a pragmatic optimist and he believed that “something can be done in school that will alter the lenses through which one sees the world... schooling can provide a point of view from which what *is* can be seen clearly, what *was* as a living present, and what *will be* as filled with possibilities” (x). Revisiting Postman’s narratives has the opportunity to revitalize education reform by focusing the debate on the essential question of why. Diane Ravitch, whom Postman critiqued in her former life as a proponent of testing and technology, has more recently written in *Death and Life of the Great American School System* that “not having a curriculum indicates our unwillingness or inability to define what we are trying to accomplish” (231). Without a narrative to tell, Postman might ask, what is the curriculum for? In fact, he does ask that question of E.D. Hirsch, whose cultural literacy project may give students background knowledge, but, according to Postman, fails to provide them with a meaningful framework to put it to purposeful use (74-75). Put the narratives first and the curriculum becomes a part of the conversation. Schools become a platform for introducing the next generation to the narrative and equipping them to shape it and then pass it on.

Bibliography

Postman, Neil. *The End of Education*. (Vintage, 1996).