

Boise State University

ScholarWorks

University Author Recognition Bibliography:
2021

University Author Recognition Bibliographies

2021

Confessions of a Subversive Student

Leif Nelson

Boise State University

Publication Information

Nelson, Leif. (2021). "Confessions of a Subversive Student". In C. Friend (Ed.), *Hybrid Teaching: Pedagogy, People, and Politics*, (pp. 60-73). Hybrid Pedagogy Inc.



Confessions of a Subversive Student

Leif Nelson

I would characterize my lifelong relationship with formal education as a kind of dissonant harmony. As a kid, part of me loved school, yet I would sometimes feel like I was being assimilated by regimented institutions of homogenization. Living “off the grid” with hippie parents was a stark contrast to the school environment of bright (fluorescent) lights, equidistant rows of desks, and tightly managed schedules. Today, the dissonance continues as I find myself at times upholding and perpetuating systems of conformity in education, while simultaneously trying to disrupt and subvert those systems in order to reveal and dismantle anything that could be inhumane or obsolete. Reconciliation is slow-going and messy. The pendulum swings a wide arc before settling in its consonant center.

In fifth grade, we were given fake money for good grades and good behavior. The “money” was to be spent at “sales” during which our teacher provided trinkets, candy, etc. that we could purchase. This fake economy—supposedly designed to teach us about the “real” economy—was a regulated, glorified reward system for obedience and the timely completion of worksheets. I used the fake currency to set up my own black market. I “hired”

classmates to bring toys from home that they could sell, and we expanded our business to other grades that didn't even use the currency except for in my shadow economy. After trying to bribe a second-grader to let me use his basketball at recess, I got in trouble, and my shadow economy collapsed.

That same year, my teacher asked me if she could submit for publication a cartoon I made about saving endangered species. For the first time in my life, I considered the possibility that the things I did in school might have value in the "real world."

In high school, I collected forged hall passes and classroom keys, so I could skip class and spend as much time as possible in the band room writing songs and playing instruments or in the marketing classroom, drinking coffee with friends. Despite my truancies, I genuinely liked thinking and learning, but I preferred to do it on my own time and in my own style. I immersed myself in extra-curricular activities. I was like Jason Schwartzman's character in the Wes Anderson (1998) film, *Rushmore*, founding and presiding over several clubs and organizations. For me, the self-direction and autonomy afforded by extracurricular activities was rewarding in ways that "traditional" coursework was not (e.g., a friend and I founded a DJ club; we were given a sizable budget from the school to buy sound and lighting equipment, and we DJ'ed actual school dances).

I became class Vice President after giving a campaign speech promising to host more punk shows at our school and ending with a shout of, "fight the power!"

A few teachers recognized and responded to my subversive tendencies in interesting ways. An English teacher allowed me to choose and direct a class production of a play. I chose *God* by Woody W. Allen (1975). The teacher essentially stepped aside and let my classmates and me decide how to spend our time in class (we created a fantastic "God-machine" and ultimately performed the play for a special audience of "mature" friends in the cafeteria). A Marketing teacher created a new course offering for me, so I could run the school store and create a newsletter that was distributed to marketing students across the entire state. These experiences were memorable, but they amplified the sense of disengagement I felt in the lecture-based, textbook-centered, breadth-of-coverage curriculum that was the norm in many of my other classes.

In college, classmates would sometimes wonder how I earned passing grades without purchasing textbooks or even attending class (my secret: I showed up on test days). Like with K-12, in college, obedience and short-term memory was too often given disproportionate value. But again, there were exceptions: I took every philosophy course I could. These felt more like book clubs to me—classes were usually unstructured, student-led dis-

cussions. But by the time I had earned enough philosophy credits for a major, I discovered that a philosophy degree didn't actually exist at my university. So, I became an English major (finding that these classes had the same type of "book club" format that I enjoyed). Outside of class, I managed the school newspaper and used it as a vehicle to share tips on how to save money in college (e.g., "become a temporary music major to get free guitar lessons"), print cartoons that criticized the financial aid racket, and publish a special issue that contained course evaluation scores for every instructor (which sparked an interesting debate about "open records" law). Outside of class, I found discussions with friends, classmates, and professors to be where much genuine learning took place.

After college, I took a tech writing job at my alma mater's Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology Development, where I was exposed to constructivist theories of teaching and learning and the technologies that supported them. I was at the ground floor of a boom in online learning in higher education. I remember wishing things like constructivist activities and online learning were more widely adopted when I was in school.

In my work, I came to recognize and name the things that had caused my earlier frustrations with the educational system. The system I had traveled through—with its fake money and multiple choice tests—was still very influenced by behaviorist educational theories. I became drawn to new research trends that explored student-centered approaches. These approaches were often coupled with innovative uses of technology. I had stumbled onto a path that would become my passion.

Today, I am an information-technology director at a university, an adjunct instructor, and a recent graduate of a doctoral program in education. I am about as immersed in the "academy" as one can be, yet I still have this nagging feeling sometimes that something is amiss—that academia as a whole can more effectively develop all individuals to be autonomous and engaged citizens in an unstable world. On one level, this work requires a departure from Aristotelian/Newtonian thinking that has shaped our curriculum (and our organizational structures) into being linear, hierarchical, taxonomical, and essentialistic. It also requires teachers who embrace the values of freedom, empathy, creativity, and inclusivity, and who are permitted to experiment, be reflective, and present their own interests and passions in their teaching without fear of repercussion for dissenting from some status quo. They should also give their students the same latitude.

Paulo Freire (2014) says, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of

the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

As I continue to participate in systems and structures that tend to favor conformity, I am also doing what I can to promote critical reflection and practice. I consider whether and how my actions promote values like freedom, empathy, creativity, and inclusivity.

In my professional role, one of the things under my purview is a testing center. When I first visited the center, I was faced with rows of computers, faded white paint, and ominous signs with lists of rules on them. So, the testing center manager and I painted the walls green and hung pictures of nature scenes, citing studies about how nature promotes better concentration and cognition. This was part of a larger goal to shift the emphasis of the center from obedience and punishment to success and support and to shift the ambience of the space from sterile and stress-inducing to natural and relaxing.

Joshua Davis (2013) describes a "radical new teaching method" where a poor, rural school in Mexico produced some of the highest test scores in the country. The teacher who is profiled in the article said he was inspired by Sugata Mitra and the hands-off approach of asking questions rather than providing answers. This rethinking the role of a teacher from one who simply presents facts to one who asks questions in a subtle way challenges the assumptions of authority in student-teacher relationships.

As a teacher, I try to ask good questions and admit my own limitations as an authority in a world where content and information is always evolving. I encourage students to draw their own conclusions, have informed opinions, and use good filters to critically question anyone (or anything) purporting to know some infallible truth.

As a lifelong learner, I still question everything. Despite my skepticism, I need to reconcile myself to the fact that the majority of my life has been connected to educational institutions and academic environments in some way. Educational institutions are not perfect, but it is because I love education and think it is one of the most important human activities that I always look for things that can be challenged, reimagined, or improved. Educational institutions are made up of individual people making decisions and doing work. Educational institutions can be self-perpetuating machines, steeped in traditions and unquestioned ideologies. Occasionally the gears need to be jammed up so basic assumptions can be (re)examined. Both educators and administrators should see creativity as a boon rather than a burden (Westby

& Dawson, 1995). And they should help all students flourish by asking good questions, providing positive support and encouragement, and sometimes—despite impulses to coerce, incent, and control—they should get out of the way and let students lead.