

TheyDo Something Very Powerful-They Teach

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A number of years ago I was doing an interview with a CBC reporter at the Faculty of Education, Memorial University. That sharp reporter sensed that there was something “almost exciting and positive about the place.” I agreed, and said, “Yes, because we are working with young people who do something very powerful-they teach”.

It remains my contention that we do even more than help educate people to teach: we help build, sustain, produce, and reproduce a culture. And, in so doing, we, at this Faculty, have helped inform and shape a place, a community, a province. I am not claiming that we as a Faculty trotted out our robes and burdened Faculty Council and Senate with pointed plans to name, date, and stamp a culture: but, we did help inform and shape a place, a community, a province.

For my morningwatch purpose here I am saying that culture relates simply to the way of life of a group of people. If we take time to examine how culture is expressed in our own lives, what forces influence culture, and what factors cause cultures to change, we quickly see that the Faculty of Education, over a long time, cannot but be a key player.

If a culture is made up of material and non-material features or traits, how do we represent that culture? How do we reproduce, and, more significantly, how do we produce a culture? So, for me, this is an intriguing question. In a real sense we are both producers and products of our culture. The notion of culture is a powerful one when it comes to understanding how a university and society are locked together. We all can believe, with our students, that meaning is constructed through the many ways we live and share experience, how we value the material and non-material things around us, and how we see each other.

It is my studied belief that we at the Faculty of Education value, and have valued, our students, and the strong ground they walk on. We value the places they come from, and where their people came from. It helps to see that much of our work has to do with the production of attitudes, values, knowledge, and identities, which takes place in great variety. What we do, what we teach goes far beyond transmission of information. Like you, I have had the pleasure of working with good and gifted people who are aware of this responsibility and power.

It is not always easy to deal with the difference of culture. In our classes we have students who represent very different cultures. Our students come to class with different sets of values, different belief systems: we have students who would put very different things in their suitcases if they had to leave home suddenly.

Part of our job, what I call the bigger job, the illusive job, is to help students respect their own cultures. This means that their cultures need to be affirmed if they are to be the building blocks of learning. It has been shown we can begin by sharing our students’

beliefs, values, and experiences; therefore, we then encourage them to bring the wider world into their frames of reference. Then they can cross borders [As my grandfather used to say, “Then you can go places”]. We are sometimes tempted to act as if we can inject knowledge and critical thinking into students. The other stuff is harder!

It is crucial for students to be able to critically examine their own values, beliefs, and experiences in the face of other values, beliefs, and experiences. It is not easy for students to temper their own values and beliefs because they are often embedded. Such values and beliefs, and the experiences that grow out of them, are often treated as given and fixed. I believe that, by dint of our own belief systems, mind-sets, and pride-of-place, we have “slipped the surly bonds” of attempted colonial thinking and brought many of our students with us.

We also have the opportunity to pick and poke at our identities, personal and communal, as well as to represent ourselves to the world and to ourselves. The biggest lamentation for me is to see how we are willing to represent ourselves; how we are willing “to play the fool,” for the crass enjoyment of others. Far from playing the theatrical fool, Al Pittman in the wonderful *West Moon* deals with themes of a sense of place, a belonging, and being forced to leave home. The characters in the play are dead but have their voices restored on All Souls’ Day. Although dead, these characters remain preoccupied with the petty concerns of daily life, except when they come to learn that their families and friends all have left the community and that they are now alone. Now there is nobody to tend their graves or remember them.

We can talk about *Landscapes of Memory*: we need to celebrate memory — even the memory of the young—especially the memory of the young. I see how the memory of communities gets lived out in drama scripts, painted landscapes, and written into stories and poems. How do we write, paint, play, and sing the things we feel? How do we help each other, our children and our students, write, paint, play, and sing the way they feel? How do we hold precious the worlds of the imagination? How do we allow, recognize, and encourage “fits of imagination” in our children and students? How do we balance the sparks of imagination and our curriculum outcomes? How do we do that? First of all, we have to allow ourselves fits of imagination.

We then can put our daily work in a wider context. We can see curriculum as “the stories we tell our children.” We might go about it in tangled ways, with complex structures, but curriculum is the story we tell our children. We have to every once in a while see beyond the outcomes. I’m not, of course, decrying outcomes, but it is crucial that we see them as the GPS of education. [In some ways, we might have been better off, professionally, before the outcome revolution. Then, we have to ask ourselves, professionally, what are we doing]. We can say that curriculum is about *identification and identity*. The process of identification and the location of identity are at the very core of what we do in education. This is one of my favourite themes as it stresses that curriculum and public education are not simply about teaching outcomes, for example, but about forming people. That is a powerful claim. That is the lofty business that you are about!

The work we are talking about here needs to grow out of the shared life of a community and is performed for the community and in this way become part of the produced culture of that community.

As a people, a society, we can nurture ourselves or we can blight our souls. We need to be careful not to kill off the mystery. We need to encourage an appreciation of the wonder and mystery of the human person. When we claim that only what can be measured and proven and tested is worth our attention, then we are heading down a dangerous hill. We are setting ourselves up for a cultural moratorium. What is deepest about us, most human about us, we cannot measure or prove, or use or analyze. Soul-making has its own language! The use of memory is a crucial part of that. We can use language that is imaginative and transformative, but we do also use language that is limiting and damaging. What we say to each other is important. We need to recognize what is helpful and resist that which is crippling. We can preserve that which truly represents us and continue to see the great value in indigenous expressions of creativity. We do something very powerful.