

America's Education System: Teaching the Price of Everything and the Value of Nothing

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Global Research, November 05, 2019

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

"Ask students to read for more than a couple of sentences and many will protest that they can't do it. The most frequent complaint that teachers hear that it's boring. It is not so much the content of the written material that is at issues here; it is the act of reading itself that is deemed to be boring.

What we are facing here is not just time-honored teenage torpor, but the mismatch between a post-literate New Flesh that is too wired to concentrate and the confining concentrational logics of decaying disciplinary systems. To be bored means simply to be removed from the communicative sensation-stimulus matrix of texting, You Tube and fast food; to be denied, for a moment, the constant flow of sugary gratification on demand. Some students want Nietzsche in the same way they want a hamburger; they fail to grasp—and the logic of the consumer system encourages this misapprehension—the indigestibility, the difficulty is Nietzsche." Mark Fisher, Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?

I am a substitute teacher (grades K-12) in a public school system located in Virginia, a state on the eastern seaboard of the United States. For many years prior to becoming a substitute teacher, I also taught at a private school in Virginia. Tuition and fees at the private school are approximately \$42,000 (USD), the public schools are, of course, tuition free.

To be sure, there are highly motivated students in both educational settings that call into question Mark Fisher's observation above. But in the main, both organization's struggle with figuring out if they are working with their subjects as students or as consumers of services provided by teachers and administrators.

From what I have observed in the tiny microcosm in which I've worked, adults have not figured out how to teach [Generation Z](#). It is as if K-12 students are; well, lab rats, in a messy experiment that reflects adult confusion about how to facilitate learning in an era when all the "book learning" education seeks to impart is largely available on the World Wide Web (WWW). Reality hits video screens before adults can interpret it for their children; that is, assuming the adults are up to the task. Twitter, a modern-day ticker-tape, dumbs down the American populace. Attention spans for students and adults are measured in 10 minute increments, if that.

Teachers are little more than circuits in America's educational network and, as such, transmit surface information to the students and little more. The kids know a lot, for sure, but they, like the adults that school them and lead them, have no intellectual depth, something required for critical thinking. It is fitting, I suppose, that in these times when the United States is a polarized nation of cynics who believe in nothing, it's not surprising that its educators teach the young to be cynics. But as [Oscar Wilde](#) noted through one of his

characters, a cynic is “one who knows the price of everything but the value of nothing.”

And yet the very adults (academics, corporate leaders, politicians) that created this cynical, digitized short attention span world whine about students not being able to read and write, think critically or master math. There is a reason for that: They are not being taught effectively to do those things. All of which reaffirms something I wrote in 2013: [The American Education System is creating Ignorant Adults](#).

The leaders of Boeing and Lockheed Martin worry out loud about the absence of US school aged students who can excel at science, technology, engineering and math disciplines (STEM). But they have no problem [funding initiatives for Chinese students](#) and [aviation professionals](#) in China.

Hocus Pocus

Back in the USA, school classrooms are a mishmash of technology, new wave/repackaged learning techniques and revisionist history. Apple I-Pads and Smart Boards are located in each classroom for student/teacher use. They are all connected to software that provides music, cartoons and learning platforms like [Canvas](#) for most grade levels. The latest teaching fads like [Maker Learning](#) with its “Digital Promise” backed by Google and Pixar, among others, competes with concepts like the Flipped Classroom, Blended Learning and other pedagogies that come in and out of vogue. And yet, along side all the technology are crayons, magic markers, pencils, paper and cardboard for writing and drawing.

It's no stretch to say that I-Phones, Android and other hand-held devices may cause [epigenetic](#) changes. Students, teachers/coaches and administrators are constantly staring head down at their computing-communications devices. It is tough to get a face-to-face conversation going with most anyone in these groups as their eyes and heads are in the down position while sitting, walking or standing. Even if you are having a meatspace meeting, participants will incessantly dart their eyes to the handheld safely nearby the hand, in the hand, or on the lap (looking down again).

America's past, woeful in many respects, is being revised again by adults to suit the agenda of those who seek to promote a narrative that seeks to change the political/cultural narrative of US society and its history, and it is aimed at young students in particular. The New York Times (NYT) [1619 Project](#) is an example of this. According to the [World Socialist Website](#),

“The 1619 Project, launched by the Times in August, presents American history in a purely racial lens and blames all white people for the enslavement of 4 million black people as chattel property. “

The NYT has provided teaching materials that are being used by colleges, universities and high schools across the United States. Who is willing or capable of debating the claims of the New York Times; or should we say, who is willing to be labeled a racist for disagreeing with The [revisionist authors](#) of the 1619 Project? At the collegiate level, at least, there may be debate on the matter but at the high school level, what teacher is going to argue against using 1619 teaching materials. After all it is the New York Times.

What is very troubling about the NYT revisionism is that it makes the preposterous claim

that racism is part of the DNA of all white people. The World Socialist Website claims that: "This is dangerous politics, and very bad history...[it] mixes anti-historical metaphors pertaining to biological determinism (that racism is printed in a "national DNA") and to religious obscurantism (that slavery is the uniquely American "original sin"). But whether ordained by God or genetic code, racism by whites against blacks serves, for the 1619 Project, as history's deus ex machina. There is no need to consider questions long placed at the center of historical inquiry: cause and effect, contingency and conflict, human agency and change over time. History is simply a morality tale written backwards from 2019."

Sharpen My Pencils, Fool!

I have often winced at some of the practices I observed in classrooms. On a typical day as a substitute, I arrive at a school, pick up instructions left by the teacher who is absent (or has a meeting), and head to the classroom. Substitute teachers, or Subs, are a lower class of species, members of the gig economy, and treated as such by the "real" teachers and students. I remember one teacher I subbed for was headed off to a meeting and as she left said, "Sharpen my pencils for me." I dutifully did. A majority of the teachers and administrators don't ask for your name, you're just known as "The Sub."

Once students complete their work (if they even choose to do it), which for most does not take much class time, they are free to play video games, stick ear buds in and listen to music or hang out with friends via the handheld device. One of the popular video games with male 6th to 12th graders is [Krunker](#), a first person shooter game. Is US society really that concerned about active shooters in schools?

The State and corporations can be found in some form in the public school system. One elementary school has Lockheed Martin as a sponsor of a science program. In another elementary school, a class is learning about Virginia's geography: The students print and video work product will ultimately be used by a tourism association in the State.

In both institutions learning is calibrated to the SAT, ACT and various Advanced Placement tests. Student test scores serve as one metric for teacher performance reviews along with standards set by school boards, the State, or independent audits in the private school case.

Students are not required to stand or even pay attention to the United States Pledge of Allegiance that is carried via intercom into the classrooms each morning. Some schools don't even bother with it. Yet, during sporting events like American contact football, students/athletes and fans are required, or let's say by the pressure of custom are compelled, to stand for the playing of the United States' National Anthem. American flags are stitched into football jerseys and prior to games one football player is selected to run the American flag onto the field amidst the adrenaline fueled shouts and growls of fellow teammates following close behind. A [color guard](#) from a high school's junior reserve officer training corps ([JROTC](#)) sometimes is present. They present in strict marching formation the American flag along with the flags of the US Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force.

To stand and recite the Pledge of Allegiance in a classroom takes one minute. To be upright for the National Anthem takes, perhaps, five minutes. The school band normally plays the latter and on occasion high school [Madrigals](#) will sing the National Anthem.

Yes, the militarization of US society and the deification of military personnel, even if they are accountants in uniform working at the Pentagon, is something to be concerned about. But

saying the Pledge, and standing for the National Anthem, should be a requirement for students. There has to be some measure or display of loyalty to one's country and the young must learn that. Still many want to [wipe away](#) any sense of citizenship, patriotism. Well, they are doing a fine job of that.

Mind the Inmates!

Students at both institutions are the beneficiaries of some serious force protection measures normally associated with protecting military personnel stationed at installations around the globe. The public schools in which I worked have armed police officers on site with a phalanx of civilian security/disciplinarians roaming the halls. Security cameras are everywhere indoors (hallways) and outside (entry and exit) recording movements. Public school buses are also outfitted with cameras and tracking systems.

The private school where I was once employed uses a less blunt force approach opting for a more subtle presence: security personnel are a bit less obvious and do not carry firearms. The school does employ a corporate style full-time director of security and safety with some serious emergency management credentials.

It is the same security scene at public and private schools across the United States which raises an interesting question: Are students really captive minds in minimum security enclosures subjected daily to social, emotional learning techniques or socialization/habilitation for entry into society? Or are they "free" learners allowed to be creative and explore beyond the confines of the pedagogy that seeks to "standardize" them.

No Student Untracked

There is a functioning big data brother at work tracking students as they make their way through K-12 known as the Common Core of Data (CCD). CCD is [described](#) by Marc Gardner in a presentation for the US National Center for [Education Statistics](#) (NCES) as "the annual collection of the universe of United States public elementary, secondary education agencies and schools. Data include enrollment by grade, race/ethnicity and sex, special education, english learners, school lunch programs, teachers, dropouts and completers." The CCD also gathers information from state justice, health and labor departments. The NCES also collects data from private schools.

It doesn't end there. Colleges and universities are tracking high school seniors as they begin their searches for schools they'd like to attend. The Washington Post [recently reported](#) that many colleges and universities have hired data capture firms to track prospective students as they explore websites. "Records and interviews show that colleges are building vast repositories of data on prospective students — scanning test scores, zip codes, high school transcripts, academic interests, web browsing histories, ethnic backgrounds and household incomes..."

The owner of Canvas, referenced above, is [Instructure](#). Their mission, according to their [investor website](#) is to "grow [the young] from the first day of school to the last day of work [retirement]." One of the capabilities that Instructure provides its clients is Canvas Folio Management. According to the investor webpage, it "delivers an institutional homepage and deep, real-time analytics on student engagement, skills and competencies, network connections, and interactions across various cohorts. Allows institutions to generate custom reports tied directly to student success initiatives and export accreditation-ready reports on

learning outcomes at the student, cohort, course, program, or institutional level.”

Ah, yes, the thrill of being hunted for a life time by big data brother. Anyway, there is no escape.

Don't try this in a Classroom

“Learning is an active process, not simply a matter of banking information in a recipient passive mind. Teaching therefore has to be a transactional process rather than just the transmission of information. The transactional aspect is essential to enabling students to challenge their situations in life, which they must learn to do if they are to play their parts as active citizens of a better world...teaching must be approached as an intellectually disruptive and subversive activity if it is to instill inquiry skills in learners and encourage them to think for themselves rather than mindlessly accept received ideas. We believe it is more important in the digital age than ever before.” (Ingenious: The Unintended Consequences of Human Innovation by Peter Gluckman and Mark Hanson, Harvard, 2019)

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