

Transforming Schools in a Nation of Workers/Consumers

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Philosopher Mark Johnson has described the central role of metaphor in moral deliberation. Johnson writes,

Metaphor is the chief means by which we are able to imagine possibilities for resolving moral conflicts, to criticize our values and institutions, and to transform ourselves and our situations. In short, metaphor is at the heart of our imaginative moral rationality, without which we would be doomed to habitual acts.¹

Metaphor is crucial for imaginatively projecting alternative possibilities, and for rehearsing the probable outcomes of different courses of action prior to committing ourselves to specific means and ends-in-view. This applies both in specific instances of moral uncertainty, as when a teacher needs to decide how to respond to a student's refusal to accept her authority, and in more general deliberations about the methods and purposes of schooling. Philosophers of education can offer special help in both types of cases, by discussing the implications of alternative conceptions of problems and choices for action.

Xiaodan Huang has fulfilled this role very nicely in her essay. Her focus is on the metaphorical conceptions that teachers, parents, and other educational stakeholders apply to students. She shows that when we imagine our students as workers or consumers, as opposed to learners, we commit ourselves to certain values and practices. Huang is certainly correct that these alternative metaphors focus our attention on wildly different ends-in-view, and may consciously or unconsciously justify educational environments that limit the possibilities for educative experiences.

Huang is enchanted with the possibility of schools that teach students to understand ideas deeply while learning to live together in harmonious diversity. She approvingly quotes Linda Darling-Hammond's description of schools that are thoughtful, reflective, engaging, and engaged, with an emphasis on shared inquiry, risk-taking, and independent thinking. This vision is compelling for anyone who accepts Dewey's notion that the sole purpose of education is growth, or Freire's conception of education as liberation. Professor Huang is consistent with Dewey and Freire in claiming that an education serving these ideals is more compatible with democracy and the pursuit of public welfare than is an education focused on career preparation or consumerist self-indulgence. Historically, however, these alternative metaphors have elbowed out the "student-as-learner" conception. Indeed, what is surprising is not that people continue to conceive of students as workers or as consumers, but that anyone actually takes the "student-as-learner" conception seriously.

Within our larger social order, *persons* — not just students — are seen as workers and consumers rather than learners, thinkers, or inquirers. The ideal of learning for learning's sake seems quaintly naïve, applying primarily to elites with the financial means to support leisure activities. Sure, many of us would like to think

that youth is a time in which economic realities could be shoved aside: in which students could pursue, without ulterior motives, deep understanding of significant ideas. But as I look back on my own public schooling, rarely was I able to indulge intellectual curiosity for its own sake. Without a doubt, these are the times I remember most fondly, and I wish I could recreate them again and again. However, other roles intruded. My teachers were concerned, in addition and sometimes to the exclusion of fostering authentic inquiry, with maintaining an orderly and efficient classroom, with “covering” the curriculum, with getting through the day so they could get home to their families. As workers themselves, my teachers were encouraged to concentrate on the “quantity and quality of the product,” and they worried, to be sure, about the satisfaction of various stakeholders: parents, administrators, the public. My teachers were not, for the most part, inquirers themselves. Rather, most of them had fairly limited educations, and knew little about the subjects they taught, beyond a few college courses. There were some exceptional teachers who not only understood their subjects at a deep level, but also were committed to expanding the minds of their students. But these teachers were notable precisely because they were rare.

Most of my pre-collegiate schooling was not spent inquiring or even learning, in the sense described by Huang. Rather, I was required, as were my peers, to engage in what must be described as busy work, designed specifically to be mindless, repetitive, and boring, to serve its function of disciplining my mental faculties, to create certain habits of mind and body. Only later, in college, sometimes, and graduate school, more often, were we encouraged to think independently, or critically, about issues of deep moral, political, and intellectual significance. I value these opportunities more than anything, and feel extremely fortunate to have had the chance to learn without the burden of proving its usefulness for attaining other ends. To repeat, within our larger social system, learning for learning’s sake typically occurs only for elites.

Now that I am a college professor, I am swamped with all kinds of work. I serve on many committees whose purpose seems seldom related to fostering learning. Rather, much of this work is aimed at meliorating the effects of habit and routine within a public bureaucratic structure designed to serve multiple competing interests through multiple compromises. While these competing interests often are couched in the rhetoric of learning, the university’s primary function seems to be to prepare workers for roles within the dynamic economic culture of Chicagoland, while also maximizing student choice and meeting various state and professional mandates (which are also couched in the rhetoric of learning but more realistically are designed to maximize efficiency and maintain economic interests). To be sure, students at my university are learners; but they are also workers — presently and in the future, and, as young adults and returning students, certainly consumers, attracted to my university’s exceptionally affordable fees and diversified programs.

In other words, the image of a student as learner, while compelling in its own right and in relation to larger ideals such as democracy and public welfare, is no match in the real world for images of students as workers or as consumers.

The question I ask is, could it be otherwise? Our social system thrives on its ability to take the raw capacities of young people and incorporate them into an economic and political structure which seeks productivity, compliance, conformity, and maximum cash flow. Capitalism, even in its latest incarnation as an “information economy,” valuing what Robert Reich calls “symbolic workers” above traditional craftsmen or commodified labor, values learning only as a tool for improving efficiency, expanding markets, or reducing risks. Learning for its own sake, because it cannot be simply assessed on economic value, remains a peripheral function of institutions designed by and for the public to ensure socialization and preparation for life as economic cannon fodder.

The “student-as-learner” metaphor, while powerful and compelling to many of us who have thrived when given the opportunity for authentic inquiry, seems disconnected from the realities of schooling in capitalist America. This is why John Dewey’s educational philosophy, while influential in the rhetoric of school reformers and critics such as Linda Darling-Hammond or Alfie Kohn, in fact has had little effect on the methods and goals embodied in mainstream American schools. The actual lives of most Americans are not centered around learning, risk-taking, or creative thinking. Most of us lead lives centered around working and buying. This is true across class lines. The Mexican immigrant family building a life in Chicago’s Little Village, whose father works three jobs so they can live in a nice apartment close to the better schools of Bridgeport, is in many ways similar to the North Shore executive’s family, who cherishes its home within the New Trier High School district and the advantages such a community affords for preparing youngsters for college, professional schools, and a secure retirement. Across America’s social classes, people work. Because the work they do has value, they get paid for this work. This pay goes, first, to the necessities of life and then, after perhaps a small set-aside for the future, the pay finds its way to merchants, in exchange for things, entertainment, and even education which is, unfortunately, itself a commodity rather than an end in itself.

I support Huang’s earnest plea for educators to envision their students as learners, and their own roles as coaches, mentors, wise advisors, and guides. Indeed, the only way for schools to avoid the tendency toward completely mindless reproduction of the wider capitalist society is for educators to consciously resist the pressure to conceive of their students solely as workers, or consumers. The student-as-learner conception is potentially a powerful tool for the creation, even on a small scale (within classrooms and schools), of a more humane, democratic, and moral society. Professor Huang’s essay can help educators avoid undermining these ideals through careless use of alternative metaphors for students. However, much work remains to be done. I would especially like to encourage Huang and others to look at the possibility that the use of multiple metaphors may help educators and the public to envision schools as locations for transformative inquiry.

Toward this end, I would like to finish with a few questions that might frame our discussion. First, to what extent is the student-as-learner conception compatible with student-as-worker or student-as-consumer? Second, what other metaphors can we

apply to students in order to expand still further our imagination of the possibilities? And third, are there specific social, legal, or political agendas that could further the possibility that learning for its own sake could become a valued activity within our larger society?

1. Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 33.