Chapter 15. Schooling for Life, All Lives: Opportunity, Dilemma, Challenge, Critical Thought

The history of schooling is long, driven by the need for literate people in evolving societies.[1] At every stage critical analysis has helped define the needs for literacy and the role for schooling, but not everyone has had the power or position to participate in that critical analysis of social needs, educational policies, and educational practices. Over time, however, social needs have expanded educational participation and ultimately fostered cultures of critical analysis such that critical literacy is a prerequisite for all to participate fully in modern economies and democracies. This chapter will identify in broad strokes six major moments or steps in the reasoning that has led to modern schooling and how they have changed the locus of power for critical thinking. This is also a story about how literacy is tied to power, mediated by the relation between reading and writing as educational imperatives. Ultimately it is a story about who has a thoughtful, analytic, informed say in how schools and life are organized.

But first, before we look at the sweep of history, we should gain some clarity about critical thought. Critical thought is more than having contrary views or negative feelings. Critical thought depends on a systematic framework of ideas that gives one a standpoint from which to make criticisms and an organized set of categories and terms that allows one to analyze an issue, problem, or situation based on a systematically collected set of data or facts to be examined. The organized and analyzed evidence can be compared, evaluated, related to each other, or otherwise developed into a coherent set of conclusions that can then guide understanding and action to solve exposed problems.

Step One. Literacy, Power, and Centralization

Literacy was invented separately at least three times (in ancient Mesopotamia, China, and Mesoamerica), and perhaps elsewhere, but we only have extensive early records from Mesopotamia because clay was used from the beginning as a primary medium, which has been preserved in the arid climate. In other

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regions the loss of perishable media such as wood and bamboo slips or leaves have obscured many early uses. In Mesopotamia and the surrounding region, writing began with agricultural record-keeping and over time expanded to include governance, census, taxation, economy, and ownership, along with military administration, legal codes, glorification of regimes, and similar centralizing state functions. Commercial arrangements, medical knowledge, astronomy, prognostication, and other forms of technical knowledge were also communicated and codified through literacy. This meant that scribes were increasingly needed to administer the government, military power, the economy, and cultural ideologies. Scribes served the powerful and scribal careers offered the entryway into other roles that exerted power within society (Goody, 1986; Radner & Robson, 2011; Wang, 2014).

One set of critical conclusions we as analysts can draw is that literacy has long been a means of asserting power and grew in relation to the needs of power. It reinforced and extended the control of the powerful. These conclusions, of course, would also be apparent to the powerful at the time who would employ scribes and other literates to support governmental and commercial projects, extend power and wealth, and publicize ideologies that would support their hold on power. Further, for those seeking more powerful roles in society, literacy would be a means of rising and attaching oneself to those in power. This analysis would also be available to those who would seek opportunities, perhaps to escape the difficulties and uncertainties of rural life and agricultural labor.

Even today we can see this analysis playing a part in economic statistics predicting the skills needed by labor markets in the advanced economies, where numbers of jobs and wages for routine manual and factory labor are steadily decreasing along with routine white-collar work, such as record-keeping, calculation, or other low-level bureaucratic work. At the same time wages and job numbers are increasing for nonroutine work, including advanced white-collar and professional work (Autor et al., 2003).

Although literacy grew out of agricultural needs (Schmandt-Besserat, 1992), it served to centralize control of agriculture, ownership, and taxation. Maintaining a literate class also relied on settled agricultural communities with excess production that freed a class of people from direct agricultural labor, allowing them to live in emerging cities (Chambon, 2011). Literacy-supported regulation needed to maintain urban order and extend courtly power over wider domains. Further while literacy fostered law and regulation, it also facilitated documenting all residents, collecting taxes, keeping crime records, pursuing surveillance, and thereby controlling individuals and their behavior. This analysis would be well understood by royal leaders using literacy as a tool to project law and power over their regions, extend their domains, and support prosperity to be monitored and taxed from the center.

Modern societies have equally and continuingly shown this shift from rural to urban as cities have grown particularly in the last century and a half, so that over

55 percent of world populations now live in cities with 68 percent projected by 2050 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018). Rural areas, consequently, are becoming depopulated and sparse in the necessary services that are increasingly available in urban centers. National and state capitals regulate and keep records on the more rural areas in jurisdictions, establishing laws and agencies, branches of which reach out into local communities. News and media markets that define modern cultures have become centered in large cities and report on events in national governmental and financial capitals that affect all regions. Financial capitals affect the economy, jobs, and prices in all regions, even for agricultural produce, and even in ways that reach beyond borders. Large multinational corporations now centralize power in ways that even contest the control held within national capitals. As well, internet technologies and social media have attuned us in our daily lives to attend to global networks that form a unified virtual urban environment, configured and controlled by a few centralized corporations. Recent statistics indicate that as of 2019, 67 percent of the global population owned mobile devices, 57 percent used the internet, and 45 percent were active social media users (Kemp, 2019).

Step Two. Critical Analysis of Schooling

The need for people with literacy skills to administer these increasingly complex and centralized societies required increasingly extensive training for elites to serve the most powerful people and institutions. Schooling arose to serve those needs, and the curriculum developed around the functions served by literacy. In turn, schooling became a mechanism for advancement of lower classes and social reproduction for elites.

When writing was a simple means for recording agricultural produce, it could be learned readily at the work site and passed down within families and communities with little distinction between literacy and other advanced communicative abilities. As record keeping became more extensive and part of governmental functions, however, trained scribes were needed to carry on more complex and regularized practices. Apprenticeship schools were formed on the site of Mesopotamian houses of scribes (or *eduba*), initially using copying actual records as exercises. Over time, however, simplified learning exercises were developed, schooling became more distinguished from practice, and schoolrooms were separated from the working scriptoria. As schools began providing training for more complex roles that required scribal skills, such as law (Démare-Lafont, 2011), divination (Koch, 2011), astronomy (Steele, 2011), and medicine (Böck, 2011), alphabetization was not sufficient, and more advanced literacy was required. The ability to write also started to require more and different composition skills. Over time literate cultural practices that supported the regime (Brisch, 2011) became even more distant from immediate practice in the form of dirges and prayers that praised the king (Löhnert, 2011), literary letter writing (Vulliet, 2011), and religious

texts (van Koppen, 2011). An urban court-based culture, dependent on literate production, became increasingly removed from agriculture (Wiggerman, 2011). Finally, historical records indicate scribal and consequent professional training was passed down within families to maintain elite class privileges, and further training in literacy became an important accomplishment not only for those who served the court, but also for royalty themselves (Frahm, 2011; Zamazalová, 2011).

From the critical analysis of power and class we can see that schooling early on became tied to the institutions and sources of power, with specific training for roles useful to the power structure. Consequently, schooling became a pathway into elite roles and became a device for passing privilege from one generation to the next. As literacy became important for more roles in society, schooling moved from preparing students for the most immediately practical roles of scribes to preparing them for more extensive roles in the administrative, cultural, and ideological apparatus of the society. At the same time, schooling moved into separate buildings with specialized curricula and specialized reading and writing materials and provided opportunities to study subjects that were not obviously useful in daily life.

We can see these functions of schooling until today, when the most favored professions in modern societies require extensive training that keeps youth out of the labor market and occupies much of their day in separate facilities, working with school books and doing distinctly school things. The roles they ultimately train for encompass specialist financial, medical, and technological roles, as well as cultural and ideological leadership roles in politics, religion, journalism, the arts, and the like. Current members of power elites continue to protect educational opportunities for their children to maintain the elite position of their families

Analysis of the role literacy has played and continues to play in the historical production of inequality is evident to those who create and support schools, recruit students, and make policy choices, particularly around the allocation of resources and the work needs of the economy. This analysis, as well, is often useful for families who can afford to make educational choices for their children and for youth to choose career paths within their educational options, but these consumer choices are constrained by current economic arrangements, often leaving families with little power to change the system or change the options.

Step Three. Social Needs Required Increasing Numbers of Literates: Critique of Class Dominance in Education

As societies have become more dependent on literacy and urban culture, particularly in the last couple of centuries, societies have needed the literate talents of many more people, and empowered participation in society has required ever-higher levels of literacy skills. This has meant that more and more segments of the population had to be recruited into the educational systems, even as elite classes have ensured that their children receive ever-higher levels of educational

qualifications to protect their positions within nominally democratic and meritocratic educational systems. Since power and wealth have been connected in different societies to other social distinctions, such as race, ethnicity, geographical origin, religious beliefs, or gender, the recruitment of wider pools of talent has led to inviting diversity across the divisions that previously had marked the ruling from the ruled.

In the United States the movement to inclusion and diversity has been gradual, though it has accelerated at moments of social change that have affected the economy and structures of employment. Free public schooling and then mandated attendance developed throughout the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries as urbanization and white-collar employment began replacing agriculture and other manual labor and as manufacturing jobs required higher levels of trained skill. The expansion of the U.S. economy after the First World War created more opportunities for women in the job market and was accompanied by greater access for women to higher education. Women's educational and employment opportunities again expanded during the Second World War as men were conscripted into military forces. After the Second World War the U.S. economy grew rapidly again, accompanied by rapid growth of higher education and various forms of federal support for advanced education starting with the GI Bill of Rights, which offered opportunities to veterans from all social groups.

During the post war economic expansion that continued for most of the remainder of the century, the Civil Rights movement, with great struggle, was able to increase educational and employment opportunities for African Americans and other underrepresented groups as well as other previously excluded or restricted groups, such as women, gender minorities, and people with disabilities. Immigration was encouraged with changes in the federal law, further diversifying the workplace and schools. Access to higher education particularly opened up with the expansion of public institutions, including formation of the community college system that made it possible for any high school graduate to gain access to higher education at modest cost. On the other hand, economic slowdowns and political changes in recent decades have put pressures on higher education institutions to raise fees and limit access, especially as public funding has decreased at both state and federal levels.

The critical analysis at this step indicates the intersection of economics and social demographics directed policy choices about access to schooling. This step follows on the analysis of the previous two steps that directed policy towards the need for literate classes and the need to provide schooling to produce these literate classes. While the previous two analyses facilitated the reproduction of class through the restriction of access to schooling, this third step argues for opening access more broadly. This analysis, however, does not give voice to curriculum designers, let alone teachers in the classroom, and certainly not to the students or their families, except to try to position themselves within whatever system policy has put in place. If there is an inherent curricular mandate in this level of policy,

it is only to be attentive to workplace skills and maintain the social and cultural structures that define current economic and political arrangements. The next step will bring us closer to the classroom where curricular designers and teachers shape the student experience.

Step Four. Critique of Elite Assumptions in Education

The expansion of schooling to more diverse groups of people created some dilemmas. Schools from the beginning were aimed at developing people who could take on elite roles in society and thus would become committed to the economic, legal, and governmental systems they would be part of. This of course often meant histories that glorified leaders, religious and arts training that supported the values and ideological commitments of the regime, and development of practitioners to serve the health, wealth, and well-being of the populace (thus demonstrating the beneficence and wisdom of the regime).

The cultural beliefs embedded in education typically looked back to the founding documents of the culture or religion, such as sacred books and the study of ancient languages in which they were inscribed. In European Christian education this led to the primacy of Latin and to a lesser extent Greek, which brought with them veneration and authority of the knowledge and texts of the classic Roman and Greek civilizations. The texts of church fathers and more recent scholars were also included in this world of classic languages. These languages and texts, removed from the everyday life of students, were treated as the key to values, cultural authority, and power, available only to the educated elite. Only with the rise of romantic nationalism in the 19th century were these classic texts in dead languages supplemented with more recent vernacular texts of each nation. But these texts in turn became canonized as exemplifying the genius of each nation and were taught in schools as a cultural heritage. Of course, these texts were chosen for moral and ideological values that would inspire the young to uphold the ideals of the society.

These educational and cultural ideals meant that school attempted to enlist the new students from non-elite backgrounds into distant values, texts, knowledge, and even languages that would set them apart as elites, distinguished from the world around them. These values and modes of life would often be at odds with the lives and communities of students from non-elite backgrounds. Students would have to choose between elite values and identities and the values and identities of their families and communities. These various challenges and tensions would affect motivation and attachment to the world of schooling and keep students from engaging in education with whole hearts and whole minds. Many students would come to believe schooling was not for them or just an academic game played by the ruling class. Some would play along for their advantage while others might adopt what they saw as a better way of life, though at the cost of rejecting much of their experience outside the enclaves of the academic world.

This analysis of the impact of curriculum on students led some educators to redesign curricula to bring texts more familiar to student lives and even to admit heterodox texts and forms of knowledge that might speak to the students' skepticism and experience. This movement to open up the perspectives taught and discussed in schools is in large part the product of the latter decades of the 20th century, at least in the US. History taught in the universities and secondary schools moved beyond the accomplishments of western civilizations and American progress to examine the complexity, interests, cruelty, misdeeds, or just thoughtlessness of deeds done in the name of civilization and nation. Colonialism, racism, slavery, genocide of indigenous peoples, exploitation, class privilege, homophobia, and trauma became central concerns, along with the study of everyday lives of people and families. Similarly literary studies opened students to critique of traditional ideologies and began to value vernacular texts that reflected the diverse experiences of many different kinds of people that formed everyday culture. Heterodox and skeptical texts offering social critiques appeared in classroom curricula. Sociology focused more on problems currently confronting society, and anthropology turned from the study of exotic others in vanishing traditional ways of life to examination of contemporary cultures and subcultures coping with the changing conditions of the modern world.

This critical discussion of curriculum has been carried out by educators, curricular designers, textbook writers, and teachers as they have developed their lesson plans. The ability to have power to make decisions based on critical analysis of student needs and motivations has moved closer to the classroom and those familiar with the students. Those most familiar with students have recognized the importance of using more inclusive materials so students will in fact understand that their lives and the lives of their communities are important, respected parts of the world of education and society. Decisions and critical judgment, nonetheless, are still not in the hands of the students, and students still must work with what others find fit for them to work with. Those making the decisions are those that have already risen through the world of education and thus have been enculturated into the viewpoint of literate elites, even if that viewpoint has been more accepting of diversity and the values that others bring. Students, however, do not yet have voice to develop their own views and formulate their own knowledge. This will be the topic of the remaining two steps.

Step Five. Critique of Reading-Based Education and the Rise of Writing

Although early scribal schools treated reading and writing as two sides of the same coin, as the weight of traditional texts and knowledge grew, the study and interpretation of received knowledge (that is, reading), came to dominate over writing, which remained largely limited to the correct formation of letters, words, and sentences (that is, handwriting, spelling, and grammar). This tendency became

even stronger as religious scriptures became the center of education in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic world. What little attention was devoted to logic, rhetoric, and argumentation was reserved for the most advanced scholars and was largely restricted to oral practice. In European education, lectures interpreting selected classic or scriptural texts became the dominant mode of teaching, and libraries became the authoritative repository of knowledge. Scholars wrote largely to copy or compile classic texts. Often, student examinations, even at the most advanced levels, remained oral.

While scientific publication and reports from colonial empires expanded rapidly from the 15th century onward, schools, including universities, remained largely in the medieval reading mode. Only with educational reforms in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the production of new knowledge and the texts that embodied it given much value or place or seen to be the function of university scholars to produce (Bazerman & Rogers, 2008). The largest reforms were in France and Germany, and these modes spread to universities throughout the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Germany, in particular, as universities were reorganized around research disciplines, production of seminar papers became central to education. This incorporation of scientific and disciplinary inquiry and evidence brought with it an expansion of academic freedom and university autonomy as a protected space for critical questioning and writing (Gürüz, 2011). Faculty members increasingly were expected to write, and journals and academic presses expanded. Further each of the disciplines developed its modes of criticism of previous knowledge, methods of gathering data, and practices of incorporating that data as evidence within texts. Specialized forms of critical writing became part of the technical and professional work of disciplines.

Initially, enculturating students in critical reasoning in writing was focused on advanced students in the form of seminar papers, theses, and dissertations, but these disciplinary forms of critical reasoning have been working their way down the curriculum, particularly in the latter part of the 20th century and fostered by the Writing Across the Curriculum/Writing in the Disciplines movement. These practices give students disciplined and focused windows to the world, to question and transform received knowledge and mandated curricula. This gives students voice and an opportunity to criticize received knowledge, educational practices, and the socioeconomic and institutional arrangements they live under. They are able to substantiate their observations and claims through authoritative modes of evidence, analysis, and reasoning.

However, this student voice is still monitored and constrained by the standards and practices of the disciplines—thus students of psychology are restricted to the methods, practices, and modes of analytical reasoning normative to psychological claims, and likewise students of sociology or economics must filter their investigation of the world through their appropriate disciplinary methods as evaluated by their disciplinary professors. In other disciplines where the application to the world is specific and limited, such as marine biology, investigations

and critical analysis, while of value for those fields, often cannot reach beyond professional concerns. On the other hand, some disciplines, such as cultural studies, media studies, and literary studies, open wide doors into considering fundamental issues about social life and widely disseminated cultural messages. But no matter how passionately the students may connect their claims to the conditions of their lives, within their disciplines the level of professional work sets a high bar for credibility. While student work may be seen as good student effort worth an "A" grade and an indication of potential disciplinary talent, it is likely not to be yet seen as a significant contribution to the field. In the interim, classrooms can model and support development of disciplinary critical thought, but the cards remain stacked against the students in these discussions, as they are constantly being corrected into normative standards, and their arguments are only practice performances to be graded.

Step Six. Students Critically Respond to Their Education and World to Transform Education and Society

Even when students had no official voice in schooling, they long had a history of articulating their views after hours in coffee shops, student organizations, artistic creations, political movements, unofficial journals, and political publications. Then after graduating or prematurely leaving schooling some have gone on to careers in politics, journalism, or the arts and literature and may articulate views and make critical arguments outside the canons of academic study. Yet how much have these nonofficial views, often about the most passionately experienced and felt issues in their lives, been brought into their academic studies and academic voices?

This is a challenge worth addressing, as it not only touches the heart of student motivations and commitment to learning, but it also is likely to engage issues of most concern to societies and bring social change. Student concerns arise from the education that they confront daily and the other institutions that constrain, define, and make demands on their lives. Their questions also arise out of their communities and out of the conditions of life that they see defining their futures, such as the nature of political regimes, the economy they will enter into, the values and ideologies of their societies, the use of natural resources, and the changing natural environment they will live in. Their questions may also be driven by their expanding view of the world as they start to meet people of different backgrounds and travel to different regions.

Students can even ask tough questions about whether the skills and knowledge that our schools offer are providing the tools they need to address their many concerns and whether schooling is empowering them and their communities to thrive in their societies. Raising these questions within the classroom can turn the classrooms themselves into incubators of critical thought with important consequences.

Meaningful engagement with critical thought in the classroom relies on students doing more writing, not as an exercise in correctness but to express their

experiences, observations, and lives. Writing is the means of developing voice and taking ownership and responsibility for the words one puts on the line. But the writing needs to go beyond reporting experiences and representing student lives to evaluating the conditions and institutions that surround, constrain, and afford opportunities in their lives and then analyzing the consequences and alternatives. The questions, of course, will vary with the level of education and the nature of the subject, but such questions as the choice and value of assigned readings or other tasks, the daily institutional arrangements and resources of schooling, or the purpose of various topics studied can encourage reflection on why things are as they are and how they might be otherwise. Such issues may also generate differences among students or perhaps with the teacher or others who are in charge of controlling school arrangements. After some exchange on the substance of perspectives, it could be of value, then, to discuss the criteria and procedures for confronting alternative views and identifying what it might take to convince those holding those alternative views. Such rhetorical discussions can lead to discussions of methods for gathering persuasive evidence and carrying out persuasive forms of analysis and argument. Often enough such discussions may then touch on methods used by different disciplines to establish their truths.

Observations, formulation of problems, and systematic investigations to address issues beyond the classroom in the community could then broaden the canvas of critical thought and the various disciplinary methods that might apply to the different problems. Sometimes a problem to be addressed may fall quite clearly within a single disciplinary domain and engage well-known methods which can be drawn on, such as in measuring pollution in the local environment or examining local climate history. But sometimes issues may be interdisciplinary, as when examining social perceptions of the economic and health burden of unequal environmental effects on different neighborhoods, so that students have to consider what combination of methods are relevant to careful critical examination and analysis. It may be even that questions escape the bounds of any combination of current disciplines so that students have to develop their own set of credible methods to proceed.

The role of the teacher then becomes a resource for helping students formulate issues, locate disciplinary and interdisciplinary resources and methods that will help them, carry out the investigation and analysis, and write reasoned credible arguments. The teacher no longer serves as a disciplinary enforcer of normalized practices—though at times the teacher may need to explain reasons for methods and challenge the credibility of student choices. The teacher instead becomes a support and facilitator of students building their own reasoning, perceptions, evidence, and analysis. Students retain ownership and responsibility for their representations, criticisms, and projects, to be disciplined only by the credibility of the arguments they can mount.

This stance of the teacher puts the power of critical thought, analysis, and disciplined methodological choices in the hands of students. This gives students

voice, amplified and enacted through all the strengths of disciplined inquiry and well-analyzed proposals and action. Their reasoning draws on the intellectual and practice resources or disciplines and positions them in an intellectual space where they cannot simply rely on conventionalized norms of disciplines but must constantly rethink in critical ways the empirical and analytical methods they base their writing on.

While this proposal seems to transform the conventional power relations and authority structures of the academic world, it still grants full due to the expertise, methods, and knowledge of the disciplines. But we as teachers and engaged members of our disciplinary communities must be prepared to receive student queries and critiques and respond with transparent explanations of disciplinary reasoning—including recognition of limitations and narrowed focus of the disciplinary perspectives, open controversies in the field, and theoretical and methodological challenges at the boundaries of the field. But even more we need to take student projects and ambitions seriously to work with them to see how methods of various disciplines can help advance their thinking. In all this we do not give up our knowledge, experience, and commitments, but we grant consideration to the students' perspectives and pursuits. Of course, some courses may provide more overt space for these broad student critical inquiries, while some courses may be more focused on exposition of current knowledge and practices, but all would recognize that finally critical inquiry will only advance insofar as each student takes it up as important for their understanding and contribution to society. Critical inquiry will only advance insofar as each course becomes a site of students learning to articulate and develop their own thoughts, especially through the complex work of writing, by which their thoughts become more articulated and open to critiques and responses from others. Critical thought is not a formula but is developed through a process of engagement, where the strongest, most credible arguments based on the most convincing data and methods stand. Students only learn this through the constant challenge of writing to contested forums in the classroom and beyond to discover what they can credibly defend.

This vision starts with writing that invites student questioning and claims but makes them accountable for credibility. The search for credibility can lead students to draw on the resources of the disciplines appropriate to their questions, even as they learn to focus and direct their questions to issues where they can come to strong specific claims. This kind of writing can appear at every level of schooling, as students in the primary grades can consider immediate challenges in the school environment or can gather information about their families, communities, or local environment. In secondary education, questions can deepen about local and national history, social problems, language prejudices, or environmental and medical conditions—or any domain where subject learning can help students look more critically and deeply. In higher education this approach may mean lecture-based content courses are mixed with courses that ask students to develop their own inquiry-based problems and realize them in papers to be

presented to peers and faculty. A typical ultimate form of this inquiry currently is a senior year thesis, but this must be prepared for by many earlier, less ambitious experiences. Too often I have seen students asked to work on senior projects with little prior preparation, resulting in poorly formulated inquiries, weakly designed methods, and confused or weak arguments. Consequently, students do not experience the satisfaction of actually knowing something with some authority, a sense of satisfaction that can motivate ever further critical inquiries.

The Opportunity

Engaging students in critical thought provides the opportunity to make schooling truly inclusive for them and their communities. Schools are not just to reproduce society, or even to invite new students into the reproduced world. Education can be an engine for social power and change. By helping new generations of students develop their own lights, using all the tools, knowledge, and wisdom of the past, but reshaping them for their own ends, gathering new facts, and advancing new methods, we invite students to be empowered critical members of society. Writing critical research that is meaningful for the students challenges them to engage in the highest levels of reading and writing, of informed literate interaction. But it is even more of a challenge for us as teachers to create the environments that will invite and support those critical writings. This receptive negotiation of new perspectives challenges what and how we teach.

This to me seems the true challenge of democratic inclusive education.

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