

Un-American Acts

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CHARLES LOWERY, CAROLYN HERNANDEZ,
ANTHONY WALKER AND CORNELL THOMAS

1. UN-AMERICAN ACTS

INTRODUCTION

In a seminal 1997 article, David Labaree argued that the educational enterprise in America is instructed by three primary goals. The first goal, “democratic equality,” reflects society’s interest both in creating an informed and engaged citizenry and in promoting relative equality. A second goal, “social efficacy,” emphasizes the necessity in a market-based economy of having productive and innovative laborers. The third goal, “social mobility,” treats education as a commodity whose sole purpose is to advance individual standing in the hierarchy of social order. The first two goals further the public interest, while the third goal unquestionably characterizes education as a “private good,” the virtues of which are selective and differential rather than collective and equal” (Guinier, 2015, pp. 27–28).

Star Trek fans are very familiar with the cloaking device. For those that are not aware the Klingons, once an archenemy of the Federation, would cloak their starships in order to gain a strategic advantage over their enemies before attacking. However, in order to fire upon their enemies Klingons were required to uncloak, and therefore become visible for all to see. Over time the Federation starships began to find ways to detect Klingon starships even while they were cloaked. Once uncloaked, all could clearly see the challenges before them and take action to successfully meet those challenges.

Often issues of inequality and discrimination are cloaked. Inequality and discrimination are often cloaked with descriptions of difference among and between human beings as ‘*less than*.’ These well developed and internalized socially constructed beliefs inform our thinking and guide our actions. Regarding differences in this way provides the justification needed for some of us to treat one human being better than another. It also cloaks the truth, resulting in pathways of life full of step hills, slippery slopes and seemingly insurmountable barriers for many individuals in our world. The results are socially constructed way of life that provides privileges for an ‘elite’ few while vilifying others.

Attempts to correct these inequities have led to actions such as the 13th, 14th, and 19th Amendments to the Constitution, Executive Order 10925, the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1964, and Voting Rights Acts of 1965. Scholars have addressed many of the challenges of inequity through research leading to publications, presentations and workshops focused on, for example, multiculturalism, diversity, sensitivity,

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anti-racism, and white privilege. Yet the very same challenges of the past continue to be a part of our nation's narrative which seems counter to our true, at least espoused, values.

Our goal is to offer a new approach. We will share a different approach to discuss, uncloak, and pave new pathways that will move our great nation towards the promise that we are all created equal and endowed by our creator with *certain unalienable rights*, including the pursuit of *Life, Liberty, and Happiness*. Our approach focuses on uncloaking *Un-American Acts* that counter our espoused values.

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America. (Preamble to the Constitution of the United States of America)

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2. NOW IS THE TIME FOR CHANGE

Presented in this first manuscript is the premise that there are institutionalized beliefs and practices within schools about students, parents, our society, and the educator's responsibilities to the learner that must be re-examined, and changed. This premise is based on the belief that most, if not all, educators want to be a part of highly successful teaching and learning environments and that this is indeed the goal of most, if not all, school leaders. A major area to be addressed here is how to better understand the students that we teach, and using this new knowledge to adjust what we do to help them learn. We begin with two descriptions of a teaching and learning environment.

TEACHING AND LEARNING COMMUNITY 1

I believe that the primary goal that schools must embrace is to become a teaching and learning environment dedicated to efforts resulting in learners developing the ability to learn how to learn for themselves. For example, learners will progressively demonstrate the ability to take questions presented to them and conduct research to seek needed answers. Learners will also demonstrate the ability to develop new questions to expand the base of knowledge. Within this teaching and learning environment it is understood that all are both teachers and learners. There exists a high level of excitement about learning, reflecting on knowledge and new questions, and creating new and clearer ways to know.

My role as principal is very important to the successful accomplishment of this goal. I model the results of this goal by visiting classrooms and becoming actively engaged in the teaching and learning that is taking place. I have conversations with teachers, individually and in groups, focused on finding meaning, answers, and new concepts, etc. Similar conversations take place with staff, students, and parents. We have established two "new ideas" resource rooms, one for faculty and staff and the other for students. Learning resources are continually updated in each room. Through self and small group research, we actually create new ways of teaching and learning in these resource rooms. In turn, we often discover new ways of thinking and learning about particular topics.

Our campus loves to try new techniques. We celebrate our successes and hold funerals for our failures. In this atmosphere trying new ideas and concepts is encouraged. What a great environment for teaching and learning! I have gained

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enough cache with district administrators, trustees and community leaders, giving me the ability to interview and select teachers and staff that want to embrace our approach to teaching and learning. State mandated testing takes care of itself resulting in outstanding success. This demonstration of success, and the continued student success when they leave us, has created a buffer between our school and district mandates. We adhere to all requirements. However, these requirements are taken as baseline activities. We take teaching and learning far beyond what the district curriculum calls for. Our teachers continue to push the envelope every day because of our students.

Every voice in this teaching and learning environment is important. We all play a significant role in the on-going activities and direction of the school. We have a great school culture.

TEACHING AND LEARNING COMMUNITY 2

The district provides each principal with a set of guidelines to be utilized and strictly followed. These guidelines provide a step by step approach for running the day to day operations of the school. Leading my school in this way brings uniformity to the district. It allows for a very fair and consistent district wide evaluation process. The curriculum provided by district officials, which was purchased from one of the national textbook companies, is designed to prepare students to master the state mandated test. This curriculum also provides lessons that emphasize the development of proper morals. Citizenships and sportsmanship lessons are also included for most, if not all, grade levels. Each student progresses from year to year, much like in an assembly line fashion. At each stop, or grade level, new information is downloaded into the minds of students.

We model the behaviors that we want students to embrace. I set the agenda of fairness by the way I interact with teachers and by making full use of the district's guidelines covered in chapter eleven. Chapter four in the book of guidelines for teachers provides a step-by-step blueprint for interacting with students in the classroom. Similar chapters address parent, staff, and community stakeholder interaction. District guidelines provide clear and consistent procedures for running every facet of schooling.

I am especially proud of how well these sets of procedures work. We have very few discipline issues with our students. When we do have discipline issues, our zero tolerance for just about every negative behavior results in students being transferred to our alternative school site for a minimum of one semester. Faculty and staff know evaluation procedures because every step is scripted and must be followed.

District policies and guidelines provide an excellent blueprint leading to the kind of school culture that, in our opinion, maximizes each student's level to be successful on state mandated tests. Guidelines also tell us how to behave. This makes my job much easier. I simply refer to the guidelines and follow the steps provided to address any issues that might emerge. Each set of guidelines, for me, teachers, students,

and parents, provides step by step directions to address just about every imaginable situation. We have a great school culture.

Question: Which of these two descriptions of a school's teaching and learning environment matches our espoused American values of a democratic society and has the potential to promote higher levels of student success?

Because we are victims of our conditioning, many stories we tell about ourselves, others, and our society transcend our idiosyncratic and unique development as racial/cultural beings. The master narrative of our culture tells us:

- that we are a democratic society;
- that we are good, moral, and decent human beings;
- that egalitarian relations are valued;
- that truth and justice are important;
- that equal access and opportunity are hallmarks of our society;
- that prejudice and discrimination are bad;
- that hard work and individual effort are the pathways to success;
- that people should not be judged by the color of their skin; and
- that although race is abhorrent, it is now a thing of the past (Sue, 2015, p. 380).

Response: A number of definitions, concepts, and actions come to mind when democracy is discussed. These various definitions are often very dissimilar. In addition, the actions that follow definitions often seem counter to the concepts described. Therefore this discussion will utilize the definition of democracy that is embraced by the organization, Democracy Watch:

A Democracy is a society in which all adults have easily accessible, meaningful and effective ways:

1. To participate in the decision-making process of every organization that makes decisions or takes actions that affect them, and;
2. To hold other individuals, and those in these organizations who are responsible for making decisions and taking actions, fully accountable if their decisions or actions violate fundamental human rights, or are dishonest, unethical, unfair, secretive, inefficient, unrepresentative, unresponsive or irresponsible; so that all organizations in the society are citizen-owned, citizen-controlled, and citizen-driven, and all individuals and organizations are held accountable for wrongdoing. www.dwatch.ca/democracy.html

This first example of a teaching and learning community believes in helping to empower students that take ownership of their learning by developing within them the ability to learn how to learn for themselves. There is an expressed commitment to discovery as well as individual group and personal engagement. The inclusion of individual voices, their thoughts and expressions of learning, is demonstrated by the use of "new ideas" resource rooms, experimentation with new ideas for improvement, and the role each can play in the on-going activities and directions of the school.

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When comparing these actions with the definition of democracy shared above, and the nine principles that represent Sue's (2015) notions regarding the master narrative of our country, we find high levels of compatibility. The actions emerging from this example of a teaching and learning community aligns with the premise that a society should provide *easily accessible, meaningful and effective ways* to participate as active and valued members of the community. When examining major educational philosophies with this teaching and learning community, the beliefs that form progressivism come to the fore.

The second example of a teaching and learning community emphasizes the need for structured guidelines that must be strictly followed. High levels of uniformity are valued over independent thinking and actions. The philosophy espoused in this example emphasizes sets of procedures that are utilized to teach, and must be followed as scripted for each step and at every grade level. One wonders if proponents for this kind of teaching and learning environment see similarities between working with a child and a chassis as it moves down an assembly track to become a car where parts are attached, (concepts downloaded and memorized), at certain points, (time of day and grade levels), and at designated junctions. When comparing these actions with the definition of democracy shared above and the nine principles that represent Sue's notions regarding the master narrative of our country, we find high levels of incompatibility. The actions emerging from this example of a teaching and learning community align well with a top-down, more authoritarian ideology, with little to no input from the masses. The beliefs that form essentialism, come to the fore when comparing major educational philosophies with this teaching and learning community. Which environment would you select for your children?

If we mean to educate them, we must recognize that all children deserve a full liberal arts curriculum. All children need the chance to develop their individual talents. And all need the opportunity to learn the skills of working and playing and singing with others. Whatever the careers of the twenty-first century may be, they are likely to require creativity, thoughtfulness, and the capacity for social interaction and personal initiative, not simply routine skills. All children need to be prepared as citizens to participate in a democratic society (Ravitch, 2013, p. 240).

Thinking

I find myself thinking that the work of the past regarding teaching and learning in low income and majority minority schools has enabled us to experience the poor academic achievement results that we have today, and wonder why we continue along this path. We look at the other most, if not all, of the time as the reason for poor academic achievement. Concentrated poverty has been identified as one major reason for reported low achievement, especially among our poor. I would suggest here that it is not the issues related to concentrated poverty that possess the primary challenges for us. Rather, it is the decisions that we make regarding how we teach that must be revisited, and changed. It is suggested here that high stakes

testing has resulted in slightly higher test scores in most school districts, but also a diminished ability to think critically among these same students. “The passage of laws promoting high-stakes testing for students and the use of test scores to measure teacher quality have both limited teacher autonomy and undermined the possibility of critical teaching and visionary goals for student learning” (Giroux, 2012, p. 2).

Voicing

We seem to identify student deficits adequately, but instead of working to eliminate the deficits, we remove opportunities for teachers to be creative in their approach to teaching and learning. We become overly structured and we work to find *teacher proof* solutions while ignoring the creative and more engaging teaching practices that work in more affluent schools across the country. Instead, we look at the conditions, and the children in them, as the problem.

A pathological approach only works well when dissecting a dead body, but not if we want to maximize student academic growth. When we do talk about teachers changing what they do in the classroom, it is from some group based, overly structured, monolithic ideology. This type of ideology is designed to determine success with the regurgitation of information stored by many students in short term memory banks, due to a lack of attempts to connect new information with the long-term memory banks of each student. The impact here is more severe among the poor, primarily due to the deficit model and generalized approach to teaching and learning so often found in low income schools. Group perspectives like these are from a pathological, *at risk, deficit model perspective*. I say pathological, because they can make a student human, non-human, and even invisible.

This repeated approach to addressing teaching and learning fails to embrace the *art* of teaching. Do we believe that only certain kinds of students deserve our full cache of creative thoughts and actions? If no, then why are we still seeing the drill and kill, sanitized, teacher proof, systems of teaching and learning, primarily in our low achieving schools? It does not work, anywhere! It is not, in any way, what we should call teaching. Most importantly, it does not touch the heart of any person involved in the teaching and learning process, at least in a positive, life-lifting way, and therefore will merely result in a set of activities that at best result in limited academic success. We have proof of this fact in every low income setting. Can we stop this horrible cycle of limited academic success and the perpetuation of poverty?

We know what works. What works are the very opportunities that advantaged families provide for their children. In homes with adequate resources, children get advantages that enable them to arrive in school healthy and ready to learn. Discerning, affluent parents demand schools with full curricula, experienced staffs, and rich programs in the arts, libraries, well-maintained campuses, and small classes. As a society, we must do whatever is necessary to extend the same advantages to children who do not have them. Doing so will improve

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their ability to learn, enhance their chances for a good life, and strengthen our society. (Ravitch, 2013, pp. 7–8)

We know what works. Just go to most, if not all, private and public schools in communities of strong economic stability. In these settings we see teaching and learning environments full of promise. Deficit model teaching and learning is ignored. Instead, the expectation for student academic and social success knows no boundaries. Students are expected to achieve. The art of teaching takes center stage as both teacher and student, teach and learn. We must follow similar models of teaching and learning in all schools. The key, at least for me, are actions that move away from mere accommodation and towards more students who take ownership of their learning, resulting in high levels of academic success. Now is the time for change. Instead of the current overly structured attempts to educate, we must embrace what Giroux refers to as pedagogy focused on critical inquiry.

Central to fostering a pedagogy that is open, discerning, and infused with a spirit of critical inquiry, rather than mandates, is the assumption that teachers should not only be critical intellectuals but also have some control over the conditions of their own pedagogical labor. Academic labor at its best flourishes when it enhances modes of individual and social agency and respects the time and conditions teachers need to prepare lessons, research, cooperate with each other, and engage valuable community resources. Put differently, teachers are the major resource for what it means to establish the conditions for education to be linked to critical learning rather than training, to embrace a vision of democratic possibility rather than a narrow instrumental notion of education, and to honor the specificity and diversity of children's lives rather than treat them as if such differences do not matter. Hence, teachers deserve the respect, autonomy, power, and dignity that such a task demands. (Giroux, 2012, p. 6)

History tells us that real change occurs after the heart has changed. It is suggested here that the journey leading to this change of heart should begin with reflections on what we as a nation truly value. When actions are found to be counter to our stated core beliefs, we must label them for what they are – Un-American Acts – and we must eradicate every aspect of these actions.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

1. What actions do you think we should take to create a teaching and learning environment of inclusion as described in this chapter?
2. How do you define Democracy and what are you doing to live by this definition within your sphere of influence?