

Rethinking Schools *Online*

Where We Might Begin With Teaching

By William Ayers

Charles Dickens published *Hard Times* in London in 1854. I'll do the math for you — that's 150 years ago. In the opening paragraphs Dickens transports his readers into the fraught world of a 19th century English classroom, and describes with fierce precision the first thing future teachers need to know:

Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, Sir!...

The speaker, and the schoolmaster ... swept with their eyes the inclined plane of little vessels then and there arranged in order, ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim.

The speaker is Thomas Gradgrind, proprietor of a school; the newly hired schoolmaster is the famously named Mr. M'Choakumchild, recently graduated from a teachers college, or as Dickens would have it, "turned" with 140 colleagues "at the same time, in the same factory, on the same principles, like so many pianoforte legs.... He had been put through an immense variety of paces, and had answered volumes of head-breaking questions. Orthography, etymology, syntax, and prosody, biography, astronomy, geography...." The list climbs higher, intermittently earnest and ridiculous, and ends with Dickens' quick commentary: "Ah, rather overdone, M'Choakumchild. If he had only learnt a little less, how infinitely better he might have taught much more."

This is where most teachers in Victorian England were expected to begin. Each was expected to be found front and center behind a lectern or a desk, holding sway with an iron hand, dispensing bits of curriculum with an august authority. Each was to think of himself as lord and commander of all he surveyed, the master of his little ship.

In 21st-century America the metaphor of master and commander seems all the more entrenched. This is where we're expected to begin. We might, however, search for more honest and more hopeful images. We might, for example, acknowledge from the start that we are, each of us, at whatever age or state of life or career, free people who are still learning, still curious, still searching. We are, then, neither masters nor slaves, but, rather, pilgrims. We lose perhaps a sense of stability and finiteness in this image, but we gain a more honest appraisal of the adventure of teaching. We might know a little less, and paradoxically we might then teach much more.

This is where we might begin: Let's not let our lives make a mockery of our values. We want to live consciously and purposefully, as aware as we can be, as engaged and connected as we can become, as energetic and active and present to life's demands and potential as possible. Let's embrace all the loveliness of the world and oppose all the unnecessary suffering and injustice we can see, all the pain human beings are forced to face. The revolutionary leader Rosa Luxemburg captured this feeling in a letter to a friend from her German prison cell in 1917: "Then see to it you remain a Mensch!" she wrote. "Being a Mensch means happily throwing one's life on 'fate's great scale' if necessary, but, at the same time, enjoying every bright day and every beautiful cloud...." So let's aspire to be Menschen.

Each of us, of course — each of you, each of your students — is born into a "going world," a dynamic site of action and interaction stretching back into deep history and forward toward infinity. Each of us

encounters an historical flow, a social surround, a cultural web. And each of us — each of you, each of your students — faces the task of developing an identity within the turmoil of multiplicity, of inventing and reinventing a self in a complex tangle of relationships and conflicting realities, of finding an "I" against a hard backdrop of facticity and "thingification."

Romantic hopes and idealistic dreams, however, always contend with cold reality, with the hard edges and facts of life. None of us is born free; each of us, rather, is thrust into a world not of our choosing. We invent ourselves, then, within a resistant world, holding it, interacting with it, fighting it, changing it. We are both fated and free, free and fated — neither entirely scripted and entangled, nor exactly limitless. We are on a voyage through life, incomplete, moving, changing both the world and ourselves.

For new teachers the hard realities of schooling can come as a slap in the face: too many kids and too little time — the structuring of predictable failure — not enough support and inadequate resources, a sense of terminal isolation. School routines, program expectations, packaged curriculum, and administrative demands bump up against the illusion of just a few months ago: "When I have my own classroom, I'll be free to teach exactly as I want to." Well, it turns out not to be so.

It's easy in these circumstances to condemn your "youthful idealism," to ah-hem about "the real world," and to begin the deadly retreat into cynicism and despair. Too many schools, after all, reward obedience and conformity (in students, and no less in their teachers) while punishing initiative and courage; too many schools wall teachers off from one another and the chance of any meaningful collaboration while creating a culture of complaint, constructing a norm of whining to one another about the kids, their mothers, the community. Where once we were lively, tumultuous idealists, clamoring for authenticity and noisily disillusioned with the world we inherited — a hypocritical, cruel, compromised, and false world — we find ourselves suddenly ready to grow up, almost eager to accede.

There's much in the school, of course, that you can't immediately get right — although you can get together with colleagues, kids, and parents to figure out effective ways to work for some hopeful change. There's also much that you can resist, and always much more that you can control if you pay close enough attention. One of my happiest acts of resistance occurred when I was teaching in New York City: The intercom had interrupted my class countless times on that first morning, and so when the kids were at lunch, I cut the wires, and then dutifully reported to the office a non-working PA. It took them five years to get around to repairing it.

There's an alternative to acceding completely or whining constantly, and it begins with thinking through and naming the commitments you bring with you into the classroom, your values, your pledge. These are not pure abstractions, but rather standards to hold in mind. A fundamental commitment might involve taking the side of your students, affirming the humanity of each and resisting anything that constrains or reduces them. Another might be to create in your classroom an environment that is a kind of republic of many voices, allowing every student a space to be seen and heard and known well as a person of worth and value.

Because teachers work in a fluid, complex, idiosyncratic world, and because there's much beyond our immediate control, it makes sense to focus on these things that you can control. First, you can see your students as whole human beings, three-dimensional beings much like yourself with hopes and dreams, bodies and minds and spirits. You can see with your own eyes, your own curious and critical mind, your own generous heart. And you can resist the alphabet soup of deficits and the toxic habit of labeling kids that infects most schools. No one can make you see kids as creatures with labels clinging to them like barnacles, sharp and ugly. You have a mind of your own, and you can become a student of your students in spite of everything. This gesture alone can be full of surprise, and deeply satisfying.

Second, you have more control over the environment for learning than you might think. No one will prevent you from bringing a plant into your classroom; no one will stop you from putting maps on the walls or books on the shelves. What do you want the environment to do and to say?

In a lovely French documentary called "To Have and To Be" Georges Lopez, a middle-aged, one-room schoolhouse teacher in rural France, cares for a dozen or so youngsters who appear to range in age from 5 or 6 to about 12. The film opens with a long, still shot of the empty classroom — chairs on desks, brightly painted pictures everywhere, plants, photographs, pencils, and markers. It is the classroom at rest, and one anticipates a sudden explosion of youthful energy as the day begins. But the camera lingers. And then, without fanfare, a turtle steps from beneath a bookshelf, and then another. We watch the two plod slowly across the floor in a ponderous point, counterpoint.

The dance of the turtles is a metaphor for Lopez's teaching: Everything is slow, nothing hurried. In a world of instant everything, of moving sidewalks and staircases, of fast food and processed words, Lopez acknowledges that the growth of a human being takes time. There is time to get deeply involved, time to pursue projects, time to make and correct mistakes, and time to resolve the little conflicts that will always erupt in a group. There is a purposeful but human rhythm to the day. There is little evidence of the characteristic superficial encounter and the hurried plan — minutes here, minutes there — the curriculum of "I know; you don't know." All five senses are engaged, big kids helping littler ones, everyone with responsibilities, expectations, jobs, goals, and limits. There's a palpable feel of growth and change, an exhilaration that our classroom now is not as it was yesterday, or as it will be tomorrow, and neither are the students or the teacher. They are on a voyage with no clear beginning and no end in sight. While everyone in the classroom helps to shape its contours, it's clear that Lopez's intelligence, values, and priorities are worked up in this space. He is the architect of this space.

In a public second-grade classroom in Chicago I could feel the expression of another distinct intelligence, another classroom architect at work. I saw a job chart, a clean-up chart, a free-time chart, and a chart of favorite books; a street map, a transit map, and several distinctly different world maps sharing space with student-made maps of the classroom, the neighborhood, and their own homes; a cooking area with a "juice bar" and colorful posters depicting "Noodles," "Chile," "Mushrooms," "Cheeses of the World," and "Natural Dyes"; each child's specific self-authored and hand-made stamp, diary, dictionary, thesaurus, "tiny books," icon, math books, puzzles, and board games; puppets; blocks; a bowl of leaves; a sofa and a rug; two large tree stumps; and a bin of scrap wood. The teacher's intentions, purposes, intelligence, and values were on display.

Charles Dickens introduces his fictional schoolmaster M'Choakumchild in a chapter called "Murdering the Innocents," a brief meditation on the dangers of imagination and choice, free will and fancy to the men of facts, the people in power. Dickens offers us a glimpse into the coercion, humiliation, and degradation that characterize the classroom as slave galley, where the teacher's task is simply to beat the drum. The chapter ends with Dickens turning to and addressing the schoolmaster directly: "Say, M'Choakumchild. When ... thou shalt fill each jar brim full by-and-by, dost thou think that thou wilt always kill outright the robber Fancy lurking within — or sometimes only maim him and distort him!"

Humanistic teachers need to develop an entirely different rhythm, sometimes in the cracks and crevices of the classrooms we are given. We begin with a many-eyed approach: an eye on your students and an eye on yourself, an eye on the environment for learning and an eye on the contexts within which your work is embedded. You need an eye on reality and another on possibility.

You might end each day asking, "What didn't I do well today? Could I have done better with this student or that one? What alternatives exist?" And you might start the next day forgiving yourself for your lapses and shortcomings, ready to start again. Without self-criticism, teachers can become too easily satisfied, and then self-righteous. But without acceptance they are vulnerable to self-loathing, to berating themselves unnecessarily. Criticism and forgiveness — this is the path to wisdom in teaching. We are, each one of us, a work-in-progress. We are pilgrims who see our students as unruly sparks of meaning-making energy on a voyage through their lives. We, too, are on a journey: Let's create a teaching life worthy of our teaching values.

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