

The Student Error

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This essay is an analysis of what one might call the student error. The aim is to understand where the error comes from, and what truth about education and schooling can it reveal. I will also consider some implications of such a truth. Helping me today are Valentin Vološinov and Pierre Bourdieu.

The student error is a set of fallacious assumptions many K–16 students make. The following description is drawn in hope that it will be easily recognized by those who teach; it is based on experience, not on empirical studies.

- A student’s effort and time expenditure must determine his or her grade. Ultimately, a high school or college diploma *costs* a certain amount of work.
- No teacher can expect students to work over certain customary amount of time and level of difficulty.
- Teachers somehow benefit from forcing students to work more; school-work is something done *for* teachers.

The main underlying assumption here is that schoolwork is a form of labor performed by students for the benefit of teachers, or for those who the latter represent. It is not performed for the benefit of the student. Even though most teachers will agree that schoolwork may *appear* to be like that, we also insist that learning is not only about effort and that all that students do “for us” benefits only them and no one else. We demand work for students’ own good and persistent manifestations of the student error is frustrating to us. It feels as if our gift of teaching is being turned down, or questioned, or not appreciated sufficiently. The student error is thus directly opposed by the teacher’s truth about education in general and schooling in particular. The teacher’s truth includes linking education to such lofty virtues as being truly human, realizing every person’s potential, promoting social justice, and preparing students for adult responsibilities. According to teachers, schooling is not a form of students’ labor; rather, it is a service provided to students often at public expense, or with public support. The refusal to understand, accept or appreciate such service is in itself a sign of immaturity. Thus we have a right to override the students’ will and force him or her to learn. An alternative explanation is that students may refuse some or all of this service because schools alienate them by being biased, elitist, prejudiced, or boring. Many more variations of teachers’ truth exist; I simply wanted to show the shared fundamental interpretation of schooling as service to students.

ON ERRORS

Errors are a prized catch for philosophers and social scientists. Every major social theory is built on reinterpretation of some common human error. It is enough to mention Freud, Marx, and Piaget: all three assumed that a common error (the slip

of tongue, the commodity fetishism, or misunderstanding conservation) sheds light on some deeper reality of human mind and of society. Error is an important source of knowledge.

Knowledge about humans is always radically different from any other knowledge. Humanities' and social sciences' subjects coincide with their audience. Scholars tell people something about these very people. How is it possible that someone tells me something new about my own life, unless I am missing or misunderstanding something about it? In other words, the very possibility of plausible knowledge about humans rests on the assumption that receivers of the knowledge are capable of making a systematic error. Natural sciences, however, rely on ignorance, not error. The receiver of their knowledge may simply not know anything about neutrinos, composition of soils, or structural characteristics of steel. Some knowledge stems from ignorance and other from error — the distinction does not exactly coincide with that between the natural sciences and the social sciences/humanities, and there is some of both in every newly produced knowledge. For example, the knowledge about commonly observed physical phenomena relies on both. Yet the distinction generally holds. The knowledge from ignorance does not need to replace other, preexisting knowledge, while the knowledge from error does exactly that. As a result, the latter is so much more contentious. It manifests itself in struggle with other knowledge, and such a struggle is never complete.

Errors are not really errors, as long as they have discernable patterns. A systematic error explains a reality that escapes the every-day understanding of the world. It offers a glimpse into another dimension of the world. Any common error reflects a well-hidden and more profound truth of a parallel universe where what is wrong is right, and what is right is wrong. Of course, it is more profound only because a scholar makes an effort to discover it. The relationship between the error and the truth it produces is ambivalent. No profound truth has been ever spoken without rejecting a common error; such truths both discredit errors and elevate them into the profound status. The very possibility of understanding of a social theory lies in the human ability to recognize our own errors and admit that there might be some truth in them. However, calling something an error in the first place is already a result of a long preexisting process of categorizing utterances as correct or erroneous.

ON PARALLEL UNIVERSES

I will use *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique* by Vološinov to explain the existence of the parallel universes.¹ The book offers a number of critiques of Freud; most of them are best left out of this paper. Yet Vološinov also makes two very interesting claims about an alternative explanation of Freud's discoveries.

First, he suggests that Freud's method is nothing but interpretation of utterances. "Every utterance is *the product of the interaction between speakers* and the product of the broader context of the whole complex *social situation* in which the utterance emerges" (*FMC*, 79). Therefore, whatever utterances are produced in the psychoanalytic session result from the situation of the session, not from the patient's psyche.

A patient wishes to hide from the doctor certain of his experiences and certain events in his life. He wants to foist on the doctor his own point of view on the reasons for his illness and the nature of his experiences. The doctor, for his part, aims at enforcing his authority as a doctor, endeavors to wrest confessions from the patient and to compel him to take the “correct” point of view on his illness and its symptoms. (*FMC*, 78)

This account suggests that the reason for the existence of parallel universes of meaning lies in trivial power dynamics between people who participate in common discourse. Vološinov suggests that the very notion of psychodynamics, of internal psychic struggles is nothing but a projection of external, mainly patient-doctor relations. The phenomenon of repression, so central to psychoanalysis, maybe a *product* of the therapy, not its *object*. Thoughts and memories become repressed because of the discourse in which they are newly “recovered.”

Perhaps the act of naming the student error an error is a projection of my struggle with the students. My truth is that education is something they need and should want; the work they do in my class is not really for me, but for their own benefit. Therefore, I cast their version of truth as an error, as a fallacy in need of debunking. This is not just one person imposing his view on others; rather, it is a dynamic process of explication of both mutually exclusive truths that results in one of them being deemed erroneous. Power makes two meanings incompatible, but it does not eliminate the “wrong” one. The other meaning becomes the wrong one, an error that is also allowed to exist, but as an error, as a meaning that is not correct. Do I want the student error to be eliminated? Not at all, for the teachers’ truth only makes sense in the opposition to, and against the background of, the student error. In fact, education can be described as a process of movement from the student error to the teachers’ truth. Not only the knowledge of schooling, but the very practice of it depends on teachers’ ability to overcome the student error.

The second claim Vološinov makes is much larger. He recasts Freud’s distinction between the conscious and unconscious thusly: the subconscious motives differ from the conscious one “not in kind of ‘being,’ that is, ontologically, but only in terms of content, that is, *ideologically*. In this sense, Freud’s unconscious can be called the “unofficial conscious” (*FMC*, 85). In other words, the unconscious is just the unsanctioned part of the conscious. Certain utterances, thoughts, and motives are allowed and others are disallowed. This is another aspect of power dynamics, but one that relies of the society to sanction or not sanction certain thoughts and desires. The sanctioning then becomes internalized as an intrinsic attribute of these thoughts and desires.

Any motivation of one’s behavior, any instance of self-awareness (for self-awareness is always verbal, always a matter of finding some specifically suitable verbal complex) is an act of gauging oneself against some social norm — social evaluation is, so to speak, the socialization of oneself and one’s behavior. In becoming aware of myself, I attempt to look at myself, as it were, through the eyes of another person, another representative of my social group, of my class. (*FMC*, 87)

The dispute with students about the student error is not just a function of power struggle in the classroom. It is contextualized by certain societal interests, by an ideology that decrees my version of truth to be correct, and deems theirs an error. I

have good allies in the struggle, so student error has to exist as an unofficial, unspoken truth. It is a paranoid, ridiculous self-deception, the world tells the students. Vološinov gives the suppressed truths much different meaning. His ostensibly Marxist, revolutionary outlook allows him to imagine a reversal of the roles between the official and the unofficial truth. What is suppressed is only invalid within a certain dominant ideological framework. May we assume that in some other social context, the student error may become the official truth? Unfortunately, things are more complicated than that. No revolution in education is forthcoming. I will now use Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the gift to show that the parallel explanations of school learning are not simply two competing ideologies; they are actually two sides of the same ideology.

ON THE AMBIVALENCE OF SCHOOLING

Bourdieu draws on theories of the gift by Marcel Mauss and Claude Lévi-Strauss, but tries to explain the time interval between the gift and the counter-gift, and the fact that those two must be different. He shows that the function of the time interval is "creating a screen between the gift and counter-gift and allowing two perfectly symmetrical acts to appear as unique and unrelated acts."² Now, Bourdieu acknowledges the "structural truth" of the gift as described by Lévi-Strauss, and agrees that the participants of gift exchange also understand the objective nature of exchange, even when they try to conceal it.

But this structural truth is collectively repressed. The time interval can only be understood by hypothesizing that the giver and the receiver collaborate, without knowing it, in a work of dissimulation tending to deny the truth of the exchange of exact equivalents which represents the destruction of the exchange of gifts. (*PR*, 94)

He goes on to show that the so-called economy of symbolic exchanges always has double truths, and the duality of truth is only possible if there exist a collective self-deception or a collective misrecognition. All sides must accept the need for repression of the truth. Gift giving is not always strictly symmetrical; anthropological evidence provides abundant examples of using the gift or reciprocity in general to establish class dominance.³ When that happens, the collective conspiracy of silence will benefit some groups more than others. As long as the institution holds, however, there must be an agreement to repress the objective truth.

Perhaps the structural (objective) truth of schooling is different from one held to be the official, powerful truth of the teacher. Yet for the schooling enterprise to exist, we need collective repression of that truth, and unspoken agreement between students and teachers that the truth is never made explicit. And when it is displayed, we relegate it to the realm of errors and misunderstanding. Those students who violate the taboo of making things explicit suffer the consequences by portrayed as naïve or immature — not only by teachers who are directly invested in repressing such truth, but also by students. Most students get along with the program, and act as if the teachers' truth was the only truth about schooling. They will say the right things when asked to speak, or to fill out surveys. To a significant extent, they also *believe* the official truth, even though like most people, they are not consistent in their beliefs and actions.

Before I venture into explaining what the objective truth of schooling is and why it needs repressing, let me point at an important mechanism of repression, also described by Bourdieu: “Symbolic violence is the violence which extorts submission, which is not perceived as such, based on ‘collective expectations’ or socially inculcated beliefs” (*PR*, 103). Bourdieu claims that symbolic capital and symbolic violence present themselves in pre-capitalist societies, and in nonmarket spheres of modern societies. The symbolic capital fundamentally *requires* denial of explicit calculation, of revealing the structural truth of an exchange. Similarly, schooling requires massive symbolic capital to sustain itself. “School is good for you, stay in school, school is cool” — all these and many similar messages permeate the educational sphere. They are complemented by news stories about academic success of disadvantaged children, of the dangerous minds remade into productive and happy minds, of schools that work and teachers that care, of inner city kids learning algebra, and so on. The whole apparatus of school reform is a vehicle for building symbolic capital.

The ethics of academic honesty is another important ideological mechanism. It rarely meets open opposition from students. However, if one accepts premises of the student error, the moral outrage over cheating ceases to make much sense. The ethics of academic honesty implicitly claims that because cheating is wrong, the work performed by students is actually very important for the society and for the student. Of course, the academic ethics’ explicit claim is reversely constructed: the work is important, therefore, one shall not cheat. Most ethical claims, however, try to prove their premises rather than conclusions.

One more way of repressing the truth is evoking the language of affection. Bourdieu makes interesting claims about family and love:

Threatened by its specific logic by the market economy, [domestic economy] increasingly tends to affirm explicitly its specific logic, that of love.... Housewives, who have no material utility or price (the taboo of calculation and credit), are excluded from market circulation (exclusivity) and are objects and subjects of feeling; in contrast, so-called venal women (prostitutes) who have an explicit market price, based on money and calculation, are neither object nor subject of feeling and sell their body as an object. (*PR*, 106)

In other words, the language of love comes up when the economic system cannot fairly compensate women’s labor, when certain forms of exploitation need to be justified. Such claims have been made in the feminist literature before Bourdieu, starting with Virginia Woolf. Teaching is, of course, a similarly gendered “labor of love,” underpaid but oversentimentalized. There is a similar stirring up of emotional and affective relations in schooling in order to disallow more exact calculations of value. I would like to emphasize that *student* work is also presented as a matter of faith, of hope, of duty, and of determination. It is connected to the romantic discourse of childhood. Children, like women, are outside of the sphere of economic relations. Their work is therefore above (or beyond) the exact value calculations. Virtue talk saturates schooling like no other institution outside of family. Teachers are supposed to care, and students are expected to repay them with love and gratitude. More importantly, the students must return the teacherly love with hard work. We try to keep school pure and noncommercial, perhaps because we do not want the purity of

mutual affection between students and teachers to be contaminated by mundane economic relations. So valuable is love in schools, we do not want anything to threaten it. Love, care, and affection do not cost taxpayers anything, after all.

ON THE OBJECTIVE TRUTH OF SCHOOLING

What is the structural (objective) truth of schooling, and why does it need hiding? One way to begin is to point out that student error is relatively more prevalent among lower class and minority students. The higher is the student on the social ladder, the less likely she is to express the beliefs associated with the error. Students from more elite, more selective schools tend to be more sincerely engrossed in the teachers' truth. By no means an ironclad rule, it may describe a strong tendency. The reason for that is that indeed, the higher is the social class of student, the more he or she benefits from staying in school and performing necessary labor. This is a trivial point; however, the economic implications of it are not fully understood. Mass schooling is organized around unpaid labor of students, labor that benefits the society, and especially employers, to a much larger degree than it benefits the individual who performs it. In other words, what students do in schools is paying their taxes. These taxes are not in monetary form; rather, they are in a form of uncompensated labor. The labor tax has been used to build anything from the great pyramids of Egypt to the Belomor Canal of the Soviet Union. The First World countries now use it to create the great technological consumer society.

The difficulty is that with years, schooling gradually becomes less and less of a tax, and more and more of a service to students. Lower levels of schooling benefit employers almost exclusively. Students contribute their labor to acquire the bare minimum of knowledge and skills that would deliver them at the very bottom of the social ladder. Let me repeat that employers and the society as a whole benefit enormously from gas station attendants who can operate a computer, or construction workers who can read a blueprint. More importantly, schools produce workforce that is capable of retraining. Besides producing an educated workforce, school also deliver an educated consumer, which maybe an even more important factor in the overall economic well-being. You cannot sell cell phones or computers, or books, or vacation cruises to a consumer who is illiterate, or completely disengaged from mass culture. Schools therefore perform an extremely important economic and social role. They do it by mobilizing the unpaid student labor through the political institution of compulsory schooling. Only higher levels of schooling actually make any discernable difference in the individual person's lifetime income; it gradually becomes less of a tax and more of a service.

Students produce real value, although they do not own much of it. The value they generate is the skills and knowledge of workers and consumers. A worker does enter the labor market, and the value of labor power she is able to sell does affect earnings. Yet this is only true for the higher segments of labor market. The workers with high school diplomas who take entry-level positions earn the same as unskilled laborers. The first thirteen years of work are therefore a form of public subsidy to the employer. Consumer's value is different, because it does not enter labor market at all; all of it is a public good that benefits the economy but does not benefit the

individual consumer much. Educated desires fuel the economy, while bringing little satisfaction to the educated.

The contemporary economy needs the unpaid labor of students to grow. Schools cannot be converted into another sector of the regular market economy. We simply cannot afford to pay students real money for their labor. This is nothing new: most economies include a hidden or open sector of forced, uncompensated labor. From Ancient slavery to modern New World slavery, from feudal societies to industrial capitalism, from Asiatic mode of production to the Communist societies: all compelled slaves, peasants, prisoners, soldiers, serfs, or housewives to work largely outside of free labor markets. Now, with the advent of the knowledge/service economy, we have a new class of people — school-aged children — compelled to work for free, for long periods of time. And of course, we have developed an attendant institution with an ideology to justify such labor.

ON THE USES OF FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE

Of course, what I am saying here can never be said aloud. It will destroy the fragile mechanisms of gentle coercion called public education. Here is Bourdieu again: “rendering explicit brings about a destructive alteration when the entire logic of the universe rendered explicit rests on the taboo of rendering it explicit” (*PR*, 113). He does it anyway in his work, but makes a distinction between the objective truth that is repressed, and “the lived truth of practices” (*PR*, 114). The latter actually includes the hiding of the former. So, educational ambivalence must not be “outed” to the extent that it will be difficult to repress, because there is a higher truth about it that includes repression of the objective truth. My purpose here is not to replace the teachers’ truth with the student error. The power mechanisms of symbolic violence are the means to socially necessary goals. What then should we do with this knowledge?

Less teacher arrogance would be the first huge step. On one hand, teachers must reinforce their truth of schooling; on the other hand, there is no need to be cocky about it. When we deal with cheating, our moral outrage must be tempered by the fact that the whole of educational enterprise is a bit of a fraud, too. Student cheating may come from the student error, a native ethical system built in response to the exploitative nature of schooling. Like the Wizard of Oz, deceive we must, but there is no need to get upset when we, in turn, get deceived.

There are also more pragmatic reasons for tolerating some slacking off, cheating, and cynicism. Educational system is unthinkable without some resistance built into it. As Bourdieu pointed out, the ambivalence is essential for institutions such as schooling. Extinguishing either the teachers’ truth or the student’s truth/error will equally destroy it. Without some knowledge of the objective truth, schooling loses its connection to reality. It migrates into the world of total fantasy, of utopia, unsustainable in the real world. The credibility of schooling as an institution depends on our ability to question it, to see it for what it really is. The collective repression is also an act of solidarity. People who share the unspoken knowledge of a hidden truth have much more in common than people who only share open truths. Nothing binds us quite as much as a conspiracy of taboo. The whole fabric of culture consists

of things that have double meanings; it is a space where one meaning is left unspoken but understood, while the other is spoken about, but not quite believed.

There are also policy and pedagogical implications of knowing the ambivalent “lived truth of practice.” The institution of schooling could be made more efficient and more humane even without a radical alteration of its nature. The nonmarket economy of schooling is still an economy. It is closer to archaic or peasant economies than to an industrial capitalist one. In archaic economies, work is often performed without immediate compensation, and mediated by symbolic and personal relationships. Yet it is never unmotivated labor. We need to learn about the actual motivation of students in the social context of their school; this would require a shift from psychological to economic frame of reference. If students perform their labor in the context of relationships with each other and with teachers, we can design policies that would encourage such relationships to flourish. Teachers could be encouraged and paid to engage in activities that create positive relational networks with students, and the sense of community at school. The accountability indicators might include the quality of community life. After all, there are sophisticated ways of measuring social capital; why not use it to measure schools’ performance?⁴ Such indicators include such things as quality of social networks, norms of trust and reciprocity, etc. To maintain the ambivalent truth of schooling, we need an environment that is capable of delivering the socially reinforced norms. In other words, the reason to know the lived truth of schooling is to attempt to reinforce, and preserve it.

We get in trouble when someone is trying to impose ideologies not compatible with the nature of schooling. For example, what Gert Biesta calls the managerial accountability of the audit society, is an example of such an ideology that does not “fit” the lived truth of educational practice.⁵ I would also venture to say that most liberation ideologies of critical theorists are just as alien to school practices. Both are not applicable because they assume a market-like economy that does not exist in schools. While it is difficult for me to come up with an exact description of a good ideology of schooling, one thing is clear: school must be conceived in terms of communal life. The ideology of schooling cannot closely follow that of the rest of the society, simply because the realities of schooling are dramatically different from those of workplace, political life, or social life outside of schools. Schools are unique and should develop an ideology that is also unique. We all often assume the unbreakable link between school and the society. Instead, we should concentrate on discovering the specifics of schooling.

1. Valentin N. Vološinov, *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*, trans. I.R. Titunik (New York: Academic Press, 1976). This work will be cited as *FMC* in the text for all subsequent references. This book belongs to so-called disputed texts that some attribute partially or fully to Mikhail Bakhtin. Without getting into the debate about the text’s authorship, I will refer to Vološinov as the sole author, although similarities of major parts of the book to Bakhtin’s writings are striking.

2. Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 94. This work will be cited as *PR* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. See, for example, Marshall D. Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1972).

4. Wendy Stone, "Measuring Social Capital: Towards a Theoretically Informed Measurement Framework for Researching Social Capital in Family and Community Life," *Australian Institute of Family Studies*, Research Paper No. 24 (February 2001), <http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/RP24.pdf>.

5. Gert J.J. Biesta, "Education, Accountability, and the Ethical Demand: Can the Democratic Potential of Accountability Be Regained?" *Educational Theory* 54, no. 3 (2004): 233–250.