

The Good, the Bad, and the Radical

A Response to Henry Giroux’s Book
Ideology, Culture, and the Process of Schooling

The process of self-assessment and examination is vital to the evolution of education. The question often asked is “Should educational systems, models, and pedagogies change and if so how?” Henry Giroux, in his complex and densely written book *Ideology, Culture, and the Process of Schooling*, tackles this question and many others by examining American education in light of influences from socialistic and Marxist models. He leads us on a long, winding journey through progressive educational thought with the purpose to connect a number of his theories to the overall process of schooling. At times Giroux seems to contradict himself by proposing two perspectives for one idea. Yet he makes the point that, in his opinion, while the authoritative directives from the “dominating class” oppress the learner, there is value to this process. Intrinsically it provides the knowledge and tools for the learner to counteract the very intent to oppress, thus providing a way for emancipation in learning according to Giroux.

Giroux begins with a lengthy discourse on the affects of *positivism* – the process of either ignoring history due to potential negative reactions and influence, or the view of history’s positive aspects only, thus forming a skewed view of the past (also looked at as the “production and distribution of ‘acceptable’ knowledge” (p. 37)) This has resulted in a trend towards the “irrelevance of history” in public thought and education (p. 38), according to Giroux. This is certainly a pessimistic analysis. One that is less so, yet equally disturbing, is the notion of the loss of historical teaching – “the notion that history has not become irrelevant, but rather that historical consciousness is being suppressed.” (p. 39)

Positivist rationality also leans toward focusing on facts separate from sociocultural and historical contexts. (p. 45) Giroux explains that this trend elevates the scientific, fact-based process and leads to negating any potential creativity and imagination that may be present in a

less politically guided curriculum model. In music education, the thought of denying creativity and imagination for the sole purpose of learning facts is preposterous. As schools move further and further away from creative and analytical thought via social studies, history, science, and the arts, we jeopardize the future generations from greater potential to advance as a society by disallowing them training that will enhance their creative ability. This trend can be seen in public schools as music, fine arts, history, and science programs are limited or cut for the purpose of allocating more time to promote fact-based intelligence through mathematics and language arts. These are both extremely important to society, yet without the balance of the other disciplines the societal structure most likely will become skewed.

The effects of positivism can also bring to light an unwarranted influence of objectivism, a state of thinking that embraces the status quo – “we’ve always done it this way” or “don’t fix it if it ain’t broke.” Some, according to Giroux, may argue that this position gives cause to remain neutral and “play it safe”, while on the other hand there is a hidden sense of “denial of ethical values” (p. 51) whereby ignorance and passivism contribute even more to the degradation of the sociocultural framework within any institution. Simply the way teachers and administrators view knowledge, which leads to the way students view knowledge, can show the effect of a positivist undercurrent in an educational system. Consider a school’s music program steeped in tradition that is lacking in student participation. A new teacher emerges with new ideas that are based on prior successful experience. The positivist model would meet the new teacher with disdain for attempting to dismantle tradition. The administration would be holding back the process of greater meaning for the students by remaining with the *status quo*. The new teacher must be prepared to defend the “higher ground” position and discover ways to not only educate the students but educate the administrators as well (all while protecting his own job). Minimizing the effects of the positivist approach can be done, as Giroux suggests, by developing “pedagogical theories and methods that link self-reflection and understanding with a commitment to change

the nature of the larger society” and to “question the commonsense assumptions . . . that influence and legitimize existing forms of public school classroom knowledge, teaching styles, and evaluation.” (p. 58) That “larger society” may well be an authoritative group from within.

Giroux discusses two methodologies that are at odds with one another yet neither fully fills the gap in pedagogical modeling. The *strategy-based* position focuses on form and practice rather than content. There is a tendency towards “social conformity rather than student initiative and imagination” (p. 65), which generally may cause a limited view of emancipation within its pedagogical process. The *content-based* position, on the other hand, prefers simplified “foreign” teaching practices to “fostering a political consciousness” (p. 67) via social relations within the classroom context. Giroux offers as an example the stereotypical image of a lecture-based classroom where the teacher stands in front of the students, seated and poised for learning, and begins to disseminate knowledge through worksheets, tests, and evaluative questioning. The teacher in this instance is not taking content into account to inform the best way to engage the students. The content-based position demands the content to be decided on first and the process of teaching to follow based on the content chosen – as the saying goes: “form follows function.”

This rationale must be examined in light of music education, particularly within the context of elementary general music courses. The breadth of stimuli and learning processes involved with elementary music education does not allow for the fact-based delivery mechanism of a teacher-lecturer alone in the classroom environment. Multiple considerations must be met, including but not limited to the average attention span of elementary school aged students, the cognitive processes that they use to engage in learning (as hopefully exploited in other disciplines), and perhaps most importantly the very nature of how music is perceived, created, and produced both by the individual and ensemble. The challenges faced with either position alone, according to Giroux, are that often classroom social relations are ignored as content or form becomes paramount. A preference of precision and haste over imaginative thought and

contemplation is subsumed. This would be detrimental to any music education class. It is in these situations that any pedagogical process should consider the “hidden curriculum”.

The *hidden curriculum* is brought to light in the ways that a teacher will interact with her students and encourage student connections to valuable meaning, critical thinking, and self-evaluation. The positivist approach, according to Giroux, would deny these vital elements of learning in the classroom atmosphere. He thus addresses the hidden curriculum in two ways: (1) in suggesting that a new definition of *hidden curriculum* may be necessary in order to better establish a connection between the hidden ideology of knowledge and social relationships, and (2) that the first step in achieving sound pedagogical principles is to allow the hidden curriculum to influence the formal curriculum. One suggestion he makes for beginning to redefine the hidden curriculum is calling teachers to give students “the opportunity to examine knowledge from a variety of theoretical perspectives.” (p. 76) By doing so, this allows the student’s cultural capital – “the socially determined tastes, certain kinds of prior knowledge, language forms, abilities, and modes of knowing that are unevenly distributed throughout society” (p. 77) – to take part in influencing pedagogical methods and even curriculum content.

Giroux categorically and, in my opinion, correctly insights that “democratized relationships are replaced by authoritarian encounters in which communiqués are substituted for communication, lectures are consistently substituted for discussions, obedience is substituted for creativity, and formulas are substituted for critical thinking.” (p. 83) This line of thinking, however, can stray too far in the other direction and fall into the trap of claiming every “free choice” as an act of creativity while neglecting to inject factual truths and healthy discipline. While Giroux strives for a radical pedagogy through statements that conflict with the *status quo* (which I do believe to be a healthy and valuable process for self-assessment), a better approach may be to strike a balance between authoritarian power and democratization. Giroux, in fact, arrives at this point as he describes the role of the teacher is *not* to relinquish power, but to

simply leave room for students to experience and exercise their own power within the sociocultural context of the classroom environment. This process better prepares the student group to work as an ensemble *outside* the social context of the classroom and encourages the use of practical and creative skills combined.

Giroux’s use of the word *ensemble* is intriguing as connections to music education are considered, not simply for the direct connection of the word itself but for the underlying concept of preparing a group to go beyond the walls of the classroom for a particular purpose. This is precisely what school instrumental and vocal ensembles are designed to do – to foster growth, learning, and the discovery of deeper meaning in music while practicing and refining techniques and knowledge that will prepare students to present what they have learned (ideally through their own “voice” within the structure of the ensemble) and contribute collectively to something greater than the individual or group itself. This is accomplished through the process of self-expression and music performance for those outside the classroom environment to enjoy and perhaps even be changed in some degree. Giroux connects this with the importance of a dialectic and believes it will lead to more substantial connections between classroom pedagogy and sociocultural experiences and practices for students. Schooling should be structured in a way that students may “validate themselves” and “use their own voices.” (p. 123) This is an important concept, as mentioned earlier, to synthesize with music education practices as it is an innate objective for music students to “find their own voice” through their instrument, through music composition, and even their own interactions with music as a consumer. This process not only helps the way students are affected by music but how they can affect others through music.

Giroux warns that pedagogical processes need to be investigated because “different socio-economic groups of students are taught different types of knowledge and different social practices.” (p. 101) Culturalism and multiculturalism are important aspects in music education, shedding light for students on the vast performance methods and uses of music throughout the

world. Yet considering the fact that different sociocultural groups learn and work together differently, might students absorb more knowledge in a more efficient way if the mode of instruction was conformed to each specific group? (This must be approached cautiously, however, as the idea borders on the concept of segregation, something fought long and hard to overcome in history.) According to Giroux, knowledge is problematic and dynamic, and human intent is the “most valid starting point for reconstructing knowledge.” (p. 103) Questioning the process of learning and acquiring knowledge is healthy, but the process of questioning can go too far. Teachers should strive for a continual balance in this regard. This illuminates the difference between *teaching ideology* and *teaching perspective*, where the former describes the notion of the purpose of education by its ideals and the latter describes the specific “tools” that a teacher uses in the act of disseminating knowledge.

Giroux certainly makes a valiant effort in suggesting methods of change for a more relevant process of education, much of which is valid in the context of most disciplines of study, including music education. However, we should still be careful not to discredit certain “classical” methods and knowledge simply for the sake of progressivism, thus supporting a valid teaching ideology by way of our teaching perspectives. As an example, I close with a quote from Arfwedson that Giroux cites in the context of discussing teacher roles. He states “the contextual setting of teacher situations varies in so many different dimensions and directions that what is ‘good’ personality, role or method in one situation may be almost the ‘worst’ in another situation.” (p. 153) While I agree with this statement as related to most sociocultural interactions, it seems that in certain cases “good” will always be “good” and “bad” always “bad.” If a student were to voice a racial slur in the context of a discussion within a diverse sociocultural group, this would be looked upon as a “bad” thing and treated as such. Yet that same racial slur could be embedded in the lyric of a song that is popular amidst the societal makeup of a particular cultural group, and that group views the slur as acceptable in the context of the music and culture. Does

this perspective alone make the racial slur “good” or any more “acceptable?” Is it not still a “bad” thing due to the fact that it affects other cultural groups in a negative way, or rather opens other cultural groups to moral inquiry and scrutiny? Shouldn’t the group that finds it acceptable be educated as to why it should not be tolerated, even amidst their own group, for the furtherance and betterment of their own culture and society as a whole? As stated earlier, we must not lose sight of ideals for the sake of promoting progressive thought simply for its merits alone. If we are to strive for, as Giroux concludes, “the building of a better and more just society for everyone” (p. 159) then achieving equilibrium in all areas of education is a noble process for schooling.

Reference List

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