

Hacking Traditional Schooling: The Dialogic Classroom and the Notion of Play

As we get excited about the Jasons and ponder what to do with the Jeremiahs, we're reminded of the traditional classroom depicted in pop culture through iconic movies like *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and TV shows like *Saved by the Bell* and other more recent iterations on the Disney Channel. The desks are in rows, with students dutifully working or passing notes to one another. Some kid in the back has his head down and another is checking her makeup in the mirror. In the front of the room, the teacher writes on the board (or shows slides on the interactive whiteboard) and holds forth on something like quadratic equations, human skin cells, World War II, or *The Catcher in the Rye*. The teacher asks a question, and hands shoot up. A test is announced for Friday, the bell rings, and everybody moves on down the hall. In this traditional view of schooling, the teacher has all the knowledge, and the students are there to learn it and give it back on a test. Students move from subject to subject, keeping that knowledge compartmentalized according to the classroom they are entering. We would argue that the traditional schooling this narrative is based on is what Freire (1997) calls a *banking concept* of education. By that he means a view of education in which the teacher has all the information and simply deposits that information into the students' heads. In this notion of education, educators have standards that they are required to teach to, and then it's the students' job to learn concepts based on those standards and give them back on tests.

As we mentioned in Chapter 1, we would argue, alongside Freire, for a *dialogic* education in which both the teacher and the student have knowledge to share, and the teacher and the student learn from each other. This was the view that all parties in the Intersections project had of education. In such a classroom, students would be arranged in small groups or circled-up seminar style. The teacher would be either a part of the circle, participating in one or more of the groups, or wandering the room watching students and documenting their learning. Students would be in conversation with each other and their teacher about what they were writing, reading, solving, or exploring. Students would

be making things with their hands, digitally, through writing, with recycled materials, with art supplies, and with tools. They would be learning the standards and concepts by hacking into issues that were important to them, and then speaking back to those issues, merging the disciplines in order to do so, and going through many iterations to reach a final product. Such a classroom would be noisy and messy and, well, real.

In many ways, there is a connection here between Freire's emancipatory education and Vygotsky's (1978) notions of child development and how children learn. For Vygotsky, play is central to the child's learning. Small children create and imagine their worlds based on what they see adults doing, and rehearse that world in their play. In a study about science learning and play, Fleer (2009) explains that students need the space to play alongside teacher input about that play in order to fully connect what the teacher is bringing to the table—the scientific concept—and what the child is bringing: natural curiosity and knowledge of the world around them. For middle schoolers, play takes the form of iteration, of trying out and figuring out and failing and trying again. This is the tinkering we were speaking of in Chapter 1.

In a 2015 Harvard project titled “Agency by Design,” researchers found through qualitative measures that

the primary outcomes and benefits of maker-centered learning were developing agency and building character, whereas the secondary benefits of maker-centered learning included the development of discipline-specific knowledge and skills and maker-specific knowledge and skills.

To us, this idea of agency is huge. What we really want for our students is the ability to know how to learn about and act on the world around them. That, for us and for Freire and Vygotsky and many other critical educators, is the whole point of education—not passing tests and moving on to the next box of information to be learned for the next test, then summarily forgotten.

In the introduction of her book *Toward a Composition Made Whole*, Shipka (2011) describes a pair of ballet slippers on which a student has composed an essay. The student actually wrote on the physical ballet slippers. Shipka discusses a particular reaction by a workshop participant who sees the composition as frivolous and lacking rigor. Shipka is used to this type of reaction. However, she uses the slippers as a jumping-off point to discuss the vast amount of literature that focuses the study of composition on “new processes materials and products” (p. 3). The point Shipka strives to make in her book is that in privileging linear, written texts, the field of composition risks “missing or undervaluing the meaning making and learning potentials associated with the uptake and trans-

formation of still other representational systems and technologies” (p. 11). What Shipka is saying about multimodality in the field of composition and the rigor of this college-level work rings true for us when we think about the importance of make in middle school and the idea of make as literate practice.

An Epistemological Difference and Views of Writing

What we are really talking about here is the difference between traditional *objectivist* views of education and the *constructivist* views that we, the authors, hold dear. Objectivism sees information that students are to learn as a set of quantifiable skills. These skills are measured through testing and identify student growth in quantifiable ways. It has become commonsense that figuring out what skills are needed and then testing for those skills is the way to “improve.” Objectivism is credited with successes like the Industrial Revolution and the space race (Knoblauch & Brannon, 1993, p. 85). Once the skills or steps are figured out, there is no reason to deviate. They become reified. And failure is a deficit; it is not a part of learning. It is a “fault” in the learner.

A manifestation of objectivism in the field of writing is *formalism*, where people adhere to a strict idea of form. Formalism appears in the concept of the five-paragraph essay, where students follow a form telling them how many paragraphs to write, how many sentences should be in each paragraph, and what the topic of the paragraphs should be. Formalist writing is easy to assess in that each of these items can be quantified and measured in an “objective” manner.

Constructivists view knowledge and knowledge making differently. In the constructivist view, knowledge and meaning are “constructed” by people’s engagement with the world rather than because of some simple, objective truth to be discovered (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). People construct new knowledge by “combining their experiences with what they already know” And this knowledge is often socially constructed (Martinez & Stager, 2013, p. 31). We make meaning by living and being in the world and making that meaning. In *Invent to Learn*, Papert takes this notion a step further by pointing to the importance of action. “Although the learning happens inside the learner’s head, this happens most reliably when the learner is engaged in a personally meaningful activity outside their head that makes the learning real and sharable” (quoted in Martinez & Stager, 2013, p. 32). Make certainly fits with this constructivist view of learning.

In a constructivist view of writing (and making), the act of writing is about thinking; form comes out of that thinking and is based on the relationship

between the author, the audience, and the purpose of the piece of writing. Power is in play here. Meaning in writing is constructed based on the relationship to the topic and the people it is meant for. It is highly situated in conversations, making the details of the context in which writing is happening of the utmost importance.

The Writing Workshop: A Brief History

Over thirty years of research in composition have documented the need for a constructivist view of writing. In 1984 Knoblauch and Brannon wrote *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing*, in which they laid out the disconnect between older traditions that influences much of writing instruction and modern rhetoric that no longer accepts the foundations of ancient rhetoric. They explain that teachers, therefore, are depending on ideas that have been proven through research to be outdated. They argue that teachers must choose one or the other in order to teach purposefully and bring modern rhetoric to the table as being different from traditional teaching and providing a richer experience for teachers. Knoblauch and Brannon argue for the nontraditional classroom we've described earlier, based on careful research and theoretical perspectives.

In 1986 Calkins wrote *The Art of Teaching Writing*, a practical book for elementary school teachers. At that time the workshop approach to writing was a new idea that only a few teachers were trying out. In her book about the K-5 classroom, Calkins describes a space where children work together to talk through their writing, where they draft and iterate and share, and where they use model texts to figure out how they want to form their pieces based on the purpose and the audience of the piece they are working on. They try things out. They make a mess, and then try again. They merge the subjects they are studying in order to explore them through writing. What Calkins was describing is the writing workshop; when she first wrote about it, the concept was new and strange. Some teachers found it scary to think of this sort of freedom in the classroom; others found it to be exactly what they were looking for. Over the years, the idea of the writing workshop has taken off like wildfire.

In the years before and after Calkins's groundbreaking work, much more was written as teachers worked with the workshop approach in their K-college classrooms (see, for example, Graves, 1983; Murray, 1985; Romano, 1987; Atwell, 1987; Kirby & Liner, 1988; Urbanski, 2006). Although the workshop approach is not seen in all classrooms and the five-paragraph theme still crops up, even in much respected publications such as *English Journal* (Brannon, Pooler Courtney, & Urbanski, 2008), the workshop approach is a recognized and respected way

of teaching writing and literacy in the United States. The workshop classroom is a hack on the traditional classroom and aligns more with the dialogic classroom described earlier.

Writing like Makers

In all that we have described previously, the maker approach gives students opportunities to play with, try out, or represent ideas through physically and digitally making things and then sharing drafts (iterations) in progress. Make is literacy rich, asking students and teachers to share, reflect, loop back, remake, revise, remix, and connect with others. Make brings all school subjects together by following recursive processes: launching an idea, composing, reflecting, sharing, and looping back and around. This is what writers do, and this is what scientists do. It's also the same with historians, mathematicians, engineers, and people in general. The open-ended, iterative, and messy process that make embodies is the same one that all learners use in authentic contexts, both in jobs and in life.

We found, as we began to work with make in our classrooms, that our students weren't quite sure what this process was all about. They were accustomed to being told what to learn and in what order. A maker space, where they could make what they wanted to make, was something that had to be built together, through trust and experience. The same was true with our students as writers. They had grown accustomed to being told what to write, the number of paragraphs to be written, and even, for some, the number of sentences for each paragraph. But after experiencing make, when it was time to engage in the messy, iterative process of writing, students were more willing and able to play with language and ideas, messing around and creating many iterations of their work. When they had formed a community based in sharing, they were willing to offer drafts to one another for feedback as well as offer constructive feedback to others. The culture of make fits hand in glove with that of writing. And writing began to fit hand in glove with other subjects.

Cindy was recently working with a student who had been fortunate enough to spend his first two years of middle school in constructivist classrooms that were make heavy. However, in his third year, he had an English teacher who had a more traditional classroom. He came to her in a tutoring session with a heavily scripted writing assignment from his teacher. It was to be a comparison essay, and each sentence of each paragraph was spelled out in the form of a question. The assignment was basically a fill-in-the-blank worksheet. Cindy had no idea what to tell the student other than to say, "Well, your teacher has been

very clear about what she wants. I guess you'd better get down to it as she is your audience." This student was familiar with writing for different audiences and purposes, so he took the whole thing in stride and answered the questions. But it's what he did next that was magical. The student read through the essay and noticed that it had no "flow" (his words), so he started to tinker with it. He played with the words and sentences. He massaged the language. He tried out different sentence formations and transitions, rejected many of them, and tried again. He continued to play with the essay until he felt good about it as a piece of writing. He wrote like a maker, all on his own, because that was the culture of school he had become accustomed to.

In this moment, Cindy just sat back and learned from the student she was supposed to be tutoring. She had taken one look at the assignment and thrown her hands up, resigning herself to stilted, formulaic writing in order to get the job done. The student taught her that even the most formulaic of assignments can be approached with a sense of play and tinkering, and thereby turned into a masterpiece.

A Critical View

We don't want to reify the workshop approach or the maker classroom as the end-all, be-all of democratic education or mark ourselves as hero teachers. In fact, we are very careful to do just the opposite. In our minds we carry the results of Luke's (1992) study, in which he points to the socializing nature of even the most emancipatory teaching practices, such as the writing workshop. We also carry in our minds the words Kurstin (2015), a middle school teacher, ponders in his master's thesis in reference to his workshop-based classroom:

I want my students to talk, to engage, not simply with text but with each other. While this desired arrangement is perhaps a noble endeavor, it is not without its flaws and limitations and of course, its failures. Within my classroom groupings, there is limited time and opportunity for personal expression, exchange of ideas and perspectives, intertextual connection, community building, and student agency. Essentially, students are constrained to conform to the narrow parameters of the traditional classroom.... (p. 11)

In Kurstin's thinking, even the workshop classroom or the maker classroom can smack of traditional schooling. The talk, the writing, and the making can still seem inauthentic and "for school." With standards to teach to and tests to prepare for, it's easy to fall into this traditional school trap. We, as the writers

of this book, do it all of the time. It's easy for a writing workshop to turn into a fill-in-the-blanks exercise and for a make to be a lesson in following step-by-step directions. The spaces are still traditional classrooms, just with more noise. We have to be diligent in keeping our critical lens affixed if we are to move students into an authentic way of learning that encourages them to construct and act on the world around them in ways that are meaningful to them. Throughout this book, readers will find us critiquing our own practice in order to think with each other and with our readers about creating truly dialogic classrooms using constructivist ideology.

Hacking Assessment: The Elephant in the Room

Assessment matters and we know that. That's why we wanted to talk about it here, early in the book. We didn't want the noise of "this stuff is great, but how am I going to grade it?" to distract from what we had to say about make in the classroom. If you are still distracted, head on to Chapter 8, where we will go into assessment in detail. We won't be offended if you skip ahead and then come back. The assessment-driven model provides us with parameters that we have learned to work within and around, and you're not alone if you are reading this book wondering where assessment fits in, or feeling a bit uneasy about what you will say to a student or parent who asks one of those typical assessment or grade questions, like "Is this for a grade?" "Is there a rubric?" "What do I have to do for an A?" These are questions that come from the traditional grade-based system, that most teachers have no choice but to address. These questions don't seem to apply in the constructivist paradigm we have described here, where production is driven by student interests and failure can be a good thing, often driving the iterations where learning and engagement are most tangible.

We admit that one of the most challenging things about dialogic education, constructivist teaching, the writing workshop, and the maker classroom is the idea of assessment. As Kurstin noted, teaching and learning in his classroom, despite his best intentions, was still "constrained to conform to the narrow parameters of the traditional classroom." In many teaching situations, assessment is the force that does the narrowing. For example, when using the much-acclaimed backward design philosophy (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), a teacher might design an assessment before teaching a particular unit and then design a series of lessons that align with what will be measured on that assessment. After the series of lessons, students complete the summative assessment, and the teacher designates a grade that reflects the extent to which the predetermined learning was achieved. The teacher is in control; learning happens through fol-

lowing directions and is signified by a percentage or letter grade. Students are accustomed to this approach, and often cut straight to the chase by asking what is the least they have to do to get the grade they want so they can get it done and spend more of their time doing what they find important.

Attempting to design a make experience around a traditional assessment model like the one just described will undermine the authenticity of the experience. It will turn make into a do-it-yourself (DIY) craft experience that has students following step-by-step directions with a predictable outcome and leaves no space to create, reiterate, try out, or fail. Martinez and Stager (2013) acknowledge this as well in *Invent to Learn*:

We recognize that the deepest learning experiences may occur en route to producing a product. Students engaged in direct experience with materials, unforeseen obstacles, and serendipitous discoveries may result in understandings never anticipated by the teacher. That is why curricular planning schemes like “backwards design” are problematic. They assume the maximum educational value is achieved whenever students get to a goal preordained by the teacher, even if multiple paths are paved. Design models for schools also tend to use stages that offer the teacher ready-made objects to be assessed, rather than give students agency. (p. 52)

That is not to say, though, that assessment and data do not matter in the making workshop. On the contrary, they matter quite a bit. Used in the way that we explain in Chapter 8, data collection and assessment are valuable to the process of learning. Words like *data* and *assessment* are not exclusive to the problematic formalist way of thinking about education. In reality, re-seeing where assessment fits and how it works can refocus students (even the most grade-grubbing of the bunch) and our teaching on what really matters. It’s not the grade that matters. Agency matters, embracing iteration matters, as does being aware of oneself as a learner and the learning that occurs through the process.

A Word about Daybooks

According to Brannon, Griffin, Haag, Hartman, Iannone, Urbanski, and Woodward (2008), daybooks are the students’ place to think out loud on paper, to reflect, to plan, to wonder, to ask questions. For Brannon et al. this is an essential tool for the writing workshop. As longtime daybook users ourselves, we find them to be powerful tools in the maker classroom as well. Daybooks house all of the reflective process thinking that we use to assess the makes. They are part of the life of the classroom, and they are a crucial part of a maker space.

In our minds, the daybook (a simple blank Mead composition book—the ones with the cow cover) is an essential tool for thinking about make and assessing it. It is a place for students to try out ideas and designs and to reflect on the process of their making. Reflection allows students to see the serious work they are doing as they tinker and play with materials. In their daybooks, students record their thinking, showing themselves, their peers, their teachers, and their administrators how they are not only addressing standards, but surpassing them.

Conclusion

The ideology of the traditional classroom has been around for a long time. It's neat, it's comfortable, it's quiet and clean, and it's easy to access. However, we ask, do students truly learn in the traditional classroom? We're sure they learn something, but much of it is simply how to follow directions and give back information that is given to them. We want more than that for our students. We want them to explore, to play, to tinker, and most of all, we want them to think. And then, we want them to be able to put that thinking out into the world in a way that is recognizable to those with whom they mean to communicate. And yes, we want them to change the world. In our view, that doesn't come from the traditional classroom. Though the idea of make in the classroom is in its infancy, the constructivist classroom, especially in the form of the writing workshop, is not. It has been thoroughly researched and put into practice with quantifiably fantastic results. So as we write this book and try out make in our classrooms, we do so standing on the shoulders of those writing workshop pioneers who were unafraid to roll up their sleeves and make a big mess with their students. All the while we are careful not to reify what we are doing, to keep our critical lens affixed, and to continue learning right alongside our students.

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