

# In Pursuit of Respectful Teaching and Intellectually-Dynamic Social Fields

Frank Margonis

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**Abstract** In contrast to educational policies in the U.S., which assume an individualistic path of success and promote the assimilation of students, this essay argues for pedagogies where teachers focus upon facilitating the development of strong relationships en route to creating exciting educational environments and fertile contexts for social justice movements. Powerful teachers model the process whereby a commitment to appreciating the perspectives of individual students is combined with the orchestration of a dynamic intersubjective context, because such contexts call out the strongest performances of individuals. Viewing educational events in terms of the patterns and rhythms that transpire in a particular social fields allows educators ways to create powerful educational environments even in neocolonial contexts that pit students and teachers against one another. Viewing educational events as social fields also allows us to understand how the common classroom, which focuses each student on the material in front of them, creates impotent individuals who dissociate themselves from others.

**Keywords** Relational educational philosophy · Student-centered pedagogy · Neocolonial educational contexts

As an educational philosopher situated in the United States, I have sought to develop a counter-hegemonic collectivist pedagogical orientation devoted to creating exciting educational environments and fertile contexts for social justice movements. Seeking healthy collectivities in the U.S. is complicated by the nation's cut-throat economy combined with its colonial history—both of which pit individuals and groups against one another. A pervasive culture of competition renders individuals isolated and impotent, and the nation's colonial history has left us with deep relational wounds, separating people who have endured forms of colonial attack—such as American Indians, African Americans, and Latinas/os—from European descendant peoples. The fault lines of class and race predict

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F. Margonis (✉)  
Department of Education, Culture and Society, 1705 E. Campus Center Drive,  
Rm. 307, Salt Lake City, UT 84112-9256, USA  
e-mail: frank.margonis@utah.edu

success and failure in U.S. schools, and to justify the large-scale exclusion of working-class and previously-colonized peoples from access to good jobs and political influence, the nation has forged a callous domestic ethic.<sup>1</sup> A narrative asserting that every individual who wishes to succeed, can do so (if only they work hard enough), transfers the responsibility for educational failures to the excluded students. Presuming that individuals have control over their own destinies, and are responsible for their own behavior, educators dismiss students who do not approximate some white middle-class norm—practices I find to be both miseducative and unjust.

This dismissal of “other people’s children” signals the need for an educational language and practice which embodies a far more appreciative understanding of students and a far more generous search for the conditions that will enable all students to thrive. We need an educational praxis that will enact what Martin Luther King called a “radical revolution in values,” from a “thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society” (King 2001, 157–8). To pursue Dr. King’s call in education, we will need a way of affirming students and teachers, despite the austere bureaucratic contexts of schooling and despite the tragic chasms created by economic competitiveness and colonial legacies. My hope is that relational philosophies of education can contribute to the creation of a person-oriented ethos in education by offering more nuanced and appreciative portraits of students and teachers and by offering teachers and students new conceptual tools for facilitating exciting educational events and powerful collectivities.

We see educational expressions of a thing-oriented society when “national interests,” economic competitiveness, and the education of “human capital” are prioritized, neglecting the legacies of racial and economic segregation which create huge polarities between the preparatory educations offered many privileged students and what Laurence Parker and myself called education for the “containment” of inner-city African American and Latina/o students (Margonis and Parker 1995; Margonis 1989). We see the expressions of a thing-oriented society when students, who are denied healthy educational relationships in U.S. schools, are objectified using deficit descriptors—such as, “culturally deprived” or “at risk”—which mark them as undeserving people (Margonis 1992). With macroscopic currents in the U.S. accentuating the nation’s inequalities, I have turned my philosophical attention to localized moments of possibility, that is, toward developing pedagogical orientations that might aid educators in creating meaningful educational events which counter the impact of societal hierarchies.

Pursing a “person-oriented” educational ethic involves, first and foremost, an appreciation of the importance of showing students respect—something one finds in the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. One of the most disturbing traits of educational policy in the contemporary U.S. is the implied lack of respect granted to the ways of thinking, talking, and acting students bring to schools. National educational policy has been designed to assimilate students to a national identity—an aim many students and parents have resented; for previously-colonized groups, assimilation is an especially-offensive goal, because it calls upon students to believe in the superiority of a nation that continues to relegate them to a subordinate place in society. Philosophically, assimilationist designs are made possible by conceptions of human nature which portray people as highly malleable—such as, John Locke’s *tabula rasa*—and bestow value on people more in terms of who they may become

<sup>1</sup> School success and failure is rarely discussed in relation to the colonial history of the U.S., even though the late John Ogbu offered a convincing corpus of research which showed that the greatest educational inequalities in the U.S. were experienced by people he called “involuntary minorities,” that is, people who were brought into the nation by force. See Ogbu (1974).

and less in terms of who students are right now (Margonis 1998). In contrast, Rousseau offered an educational vision in which “the child’s nature”—not the designs of political leaders or the desires of teachers—would serve as the premier ethical guide. Rousseau suggested that children have patterns of growth and a relation to their environment that, thanks to providential design, operate to the child’s benefit and will continue to operate regardless of whether educators and parents know and heed these natural dictates. Rousseau’s *Emile* seeks to describe these natural patterns of learning and growth so informed educators might be able to follow the path marked out by nature (Rousseau 1979).

Believing that it is a teacher’s role to discern patterns at play in educational events which are already in operation, and adapt educational interventions to those patterns, I have suggested a relational rewriting of Rousseau’s position:

Instead of asking after the child’s nature and its place in the providential order, the teacher—from this perspective—should ask, “What can the students and myself be, given who we are?” While such a question cannot lead to the full articulation of a teacher’s educational aims, it might allow her to develop aims that are organic outgrowths of her educational relationships and prevent her from creating aims which ignore the students’ ways of being in the world. (Margonis 1999, 249)

By adapting to the patterns of interaction that occur between students and teachers, educators betray an “ontological attitude.” Even though I do not have Rousseau’s faith that following the path of nature is a matter of following God’s design, I do believe that the relational patterns that occur amongst students and teachers have a power which must be respected if educational events are to be respectful and educationally exciting.

Contemporary educational philosophers, Todd (2003) and Biesta (2006), have articulated theories inspired by Emmanuel Levinas, which strengthen and complement Rousseau’s account of respecting students. Rousseau tells us to follow the path of nature—which I interpret to mean the relational give-and-take which emerges in a relationship—but he never problematizes educators’ knowledge of that path. Todd and Biesta argue that educators can never know the other, that whenever teachers act upon their “knowledge” of the other, they pursue their own desires and not the needs of students. Educators are obliged to “listen to the alterity of the other” and respond to her utterances. If we combine Rousseau’s pedagogical humility with Todd’s and Biesta’s exhortations to listen to the alterity of the other, we can envision educators who seek both to understand and adapt to the intersubjective patterns that transpire with their students, while recognizing that their “knowledge” of these patterns are no more than informed guesses, which are always secondary to the students’ own statements, which call teachers to respond.

The development of respectful relationships is a prerequisite to powerful educational events, and one finds visionary portraits of educational exchanges in the student-centered tradition. Dewey’s (1980) portrait of cooperative inquiry organized by the scientific method, and Freire’s (1993) description of egalitarian, de-colonizing dialogue—are both offered as a means of setting in motion social spaces of focused, passionate intellectual intensity, which call upon students and teachers to extend their abilities. Both men conceive of education as a social event—not as a matter of passing down knowledge. Both men emphasize the process whereby students and teachers come to know, which forces us to consider the complex and multifarious ways in which people think and act. Both men deemphasize the teacher’s authority, and neither values a student’s ability to repeat their teacher’s words, but instead asks for intersubjective engagement and the construction of situation-specific knowledge. Both discourage summary judgements concerning a student’s ability and instead focus upon the social conditions that call out admirable student

performances. Both men took fundamental steps away from the patterns of surveillance and control that have characterized the teacher-centered pedagogies they sought to displace. Despite these powerful steps, it seems to me that Dewey's and Freire's respective visions remain constrained by their reliance upon humanistic language.

Indeed, it may be Dewey's humanism which undergirds exclusionary aspects of student-centered pedagogies. Delpit (1995) has argued that student-centered pedagogies often exclude students who are not from the "culture of power," perhaps because—given the operations of cultural difference and power in U.S. classrooms—only some students act like the ideal student imagined in the pedagogies. Dewey envisions groups of students who use the scientific method to think their way through problems, and the steps of scientific thought—such as posing hypotheses and observing consequences—are said to be rooted in the biological tendencies of humans to struggle for survival. I've tried to show that in Dewey's writings, Dewey's universalistic portrait of the problem solver is implicitly white and middle-class; the schools Dewey envisioned were largely populated by European-descendant students and the forms of cooperation Dewey envisioned were forged in these homogeneous contexts. The communication patterns of white-Black racial polarization, described by W.E.B. Du Bois in his school experiences, do not enter into Dewey's conception of the problem-solving classroom. Had African American youth entered one of Dewey's early 20<sup>th</sup> Century classrooms, the onus may well have fallen upon them to figure out the rules of the cooperative problem-solving game and to claim a place in the game despite the exclusionary acts of white youth (Margonis 2009). The humanistic language in Freire's pedagogy appears in his central ideal—the education of critically-conscious activists—and in his characterization of "oppressed" students. The essentialized characterization of oppressed students in Freire's writing unfortunately operates in a way that is akin to other deficit descriptors, to characterize students in wholesale fashion without coming to terms with their specific abilities. And the ideal of a critically-conscious activist, like Dewey's cooperative problem solver, offers an at once ennobling, and limiting, vision (Margonis 2000).

As Biesta (2006) suggests, humanistic ideals limit the pluralism of pedagogies and lead to educational acts of exclusion and assimilation; thus, the ideal of critical consciousness leads educators to respond favorably only to students who dialogue in the way expected of a critically-conscious activist, while teachers attempt to bring wayward students around to the ideal (Margonis [forthcoming](#)). A relational pedagogical language allows us to de-couple Dewey's and Freire's visionary pedagogies from the humanistic language that limits their pluralism. We would do well to embrace cooperative forms of inquiry for which Dewey argued, as one way of organizing pedagogical spaces, recognizing that there are many ways for students to work cooperatively and that one method of thinking should probably not be specified in advance. Similarly, Freire's relational portrait of educational dialogue is especially exciting if we focus on Freire's insistence upon trusting, nonhierarchical student–teacher relationships and a free flow of discussion devoted to understanding the economic and political contradictions in the students' lives. Instead of expecting one form of dialogue, however, educators, would do well to invite broad and cacophonous forms of interaction into the classroom; a mix of conservative, artistic, comedic, and narrative patterns in the classroom gives a broader range of points of contact with students and clues them that a particular educational space offers many avenues of entry.

By focusing upon the character of meaningful educational relationships, and not upon the specific human traits students are said to possess or upon the traits a pedagogy is designed to produce, relational philosophies of education have the potential to offer more

nuanced and humane interpretations of educational events, while expanding the pedagogical possibilities for powerful educational interactions. For instance, when the students in Eliot Wigginton's high school English classroom expressed their dissatisfaction by burning his podium, he showed a relational perspective in asking himself—not, “who is to blame for this?”—but, “what am I doing to call out such determined resistance?” Wigginton showed a relational orientation when he responded to the students by confessing his limitations as a teacher and asking students for their help in carrying out the class. He further showed a relational orientation when he pursued extended discussion and planning with the students which led to reconceiving the social space of the classroom: the curriculum, the patterns of discussion and decision making, the products students would produce—because all these factors come together to shape the educational dynamic that develops (Margonis 2004).

To theorize the sophistication embodied in Wigginton's actions, we might turn to Gadamer (1975), who directs our attention to the rhythms and patterns of a social field. Instead of assuming individuals who are in control of their actions, Gadamer says the game plays the players. If we view educational events in an analogous way, we might say that the patterns and rhythms of educational interactions lead to, or close off, student expressions, and that the character of classroom interactions shapes the types of expressions made possible. Yet, unlike games, social fields may have rules from a variety of contexts being enacted alongside one another; students are played by the rules from their own intersubjective contexts, in juxtaposition to the other students and the teacher, who are played by the rules of their intersubjective contexts. As students and teachers engage in communicative give-and-take, various performances come to be accepted, and new rules emerge which come to be constitutive of a particular educational space. Participants develop a sense of which ways of speaking and acting are indeed welcome in this space (and which statements or acts may not be welcome)—which is sometimes referred to as the “climate” or “atmosphere” of that space. When students and teachers talk about educational events, they cite many factors which shape their sense of what can or cannot be said: the political and social character of the communities surrounding the educational space, the respective histories students and teachers bring to the space, the policies of the school and messages those policies send regarding the trust placed in players, the practices and demeanor of the teacher, the mix of students in the class, the curriculum to which they are called upon to respond—to name some of the most salient factors. Powerful teachers seek to orchestrate the development of a social space that includes all the students and allows them to express themselves in educationally-valuable ways.

Viewing educational spaces as social fields with rhythms and patterns of communication allows us to assess the dynamism of the educational relationships in play, for the quality of the relationships shapes the richness of possible educational exchanges. There are times, such as when the students set fire to Wigginton's podium, that fruitful patterns of communication are simply closed off; in this case, the teacher's didacticism met with student disinterest and resentment. When Wigginton confessed his inability to carry out the class without the students' help, he changed the signals—addressing the students respectfully, as collaborators—and successfully opened channels of communication. When he set before the class the task of designing an English curriculum that would excite the students and enable them to learn substantive writing skills, he—in a Deweyan project-oriented way—set in motion an unbounded set of discussions that led to highly engaged, intellectual investigation. This task orientation allowed Wigginton's class to develop rich and layered, academically rich, discussions, culminating in the production of the *Foxfire* magazine. The relationships students built with Wigginton allowed them to achieve high scholarly

standards; students had set themselves a remarkably demanding task, and they pursued the critical discussions and negotiations that would allow them to accomplish their aims collectively (Margonis 2004).

In contrast to Wigginton's classroom, many students and teachers within U.S. schools remain caught within intersubjective games which play out the painful and oppressive legacies of class and race polarization. Even highly-committed educators inadvertently find themselves becoming police officers when faced with resistant students, who are defined as deficient by the discourses of the larger society (Margonis 2007). Assimilationist and individualistic worldviews offer only the worst form of guidance in these contexts: resistant students are blamed, documented, expelled. Transforming adversarial intersubjective exchanges into dynamic social fields of interest and inquiry is profoundly difficult, yet we have examples of teachers who accomplish this very task. The teachers described by Ladson-Billings (1994) and the Highlander Folk School teachers, Septima Clark and Myles Horton (Payne 1995)—model pedagogical orientations which create dynamic social fields with subaltern students in neocolonial contexts. Such teachers find ways of evading the police officer-inmate dynamic by making superogatory pedagogical gestures which signal to students the teacher's distaste for the surveillance students face in their daily lives and the teacher's dedication to respecting and responding to each of the students. Such teachers attend carefully to the intersubjective dynamics that transpire amongst the students and themselves and develop means of steering the intersubjective field towards interaction patterns that will draw students out; when students speak, the teacher listens carefully to whatever they say, including that which is beyond comprehension. Such teachers find ways to create mutually-supportive intersubjective social fields, believing that students can only find their own voices when they are in a social context which facilitates their efforts of expression. To help create the conditions for such a space to emerge, teachers adapt the curriculum to fit the students' interests, their ways of thinking, and their political orientations. They also tend to the quality of relationships within the classroom space as a whole—connecting students to one another and insisting that each student feels response(able) to attend to and think with their peers (Margonis 2011). The teachers of Highlander went further to embody a unique form of asymmetrical solidarity: they committed themselves—both pedagogically and politically—to the independent understandings each student developed in dialogue with other students and the teacher, without expecting any reciprocal show of solidarity on the student's part (Margonis 2008).

Teachers such as those described by Ladson-Billings illustrate the power of viewing educational events as a social field, for it is here that we can witness the multiple strategies used to transform a polarized social context into a supportive and dynamic one. The power the game has over the players is also visible in the orderly classroom, where each student is expected to devote themselves, individually, to the curriculum in the name of passing a test. In such a miseducative space, students are effectively cut off from the intersubjective connections that would be most educative and are instead, prepared to live in social fields of isolation and impotence. And it is these sorts of social fields that may well lead people to disassociate themselves from "other people's children."

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