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The Game of School

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Anthropology is a field of inquiry not only focused on the far away and remote, on the exotic practices of mysterious others. Anthropologists also turn our eye on the society within which we live. As an academic anthropologist, I live in a university, and so it was natural that I would develop curiosity about my own institution. Researching my institution was my first step to understanding what accounts for life in U.S. higher education in the twenty-first century.

College is something that many now take for granted, but it has only spread to the “masses” in the second half of the twentieth century. Even lower levels of school—compulsory elementary, middle, and high school—were not widespread until the late nineteenth century. Yet it is obvious that people have always had to learn. Anthropologists have been documenting human learning and socialization since the very beginning, noting

the elaborate rituals or the mundane everyday situations within which young people become members of their own societies. Our very nature as biological beings, born “immature” with soon-to-be big brains, and dependent on others around us for at least half a dozen years, is part of the human story. Horses can stand the day they are born. Chimps can survive on their own, though with difficulty, as adolescents. But humans need others. Our sociality is part of our nature. That means we have to be reared by others, our cultural information transmitted by those around us.

But that doesn't mean we have to have schools. Schools exist rarely in the anthropological record, even though they seem entirely commonplace to us. One of the strange things about schools is that they tend to rank and evaluate students, unlike the kind of learning process that we experience outside of school. Two of the most important education anthro-



pologists, George Spindler and Louise Spindler, wrote an article called “There Are No Dropouts among the Arunta and the Hutterites.” To fail to learn would be to fail to become a person. Compare that to the kind of schooling that has become familiar, especially higher education today. In “neo-liberal” university, class stratification, social reproduction, and the attainment of social and cultural capital seem to be the principal products sold.

Since 2003, I have been conducting anthropological research on higher education, both at the University of Notre Dame, a private Catholic university in the US midwest, and through other ethnographic research; asking about everything from cheating and plagiarism to drinking and relaxing, and from involvement in cocurricular activities to attitudes toward classes. With the assistance of undergraduate interviewers—mostly at a highly selective private university—I have heard from about 500 students about what they experience and how they talk about it. What I’ve found is that most of them have a pretty good grasp of what they are doing. They recognize their task as amassing points and experiences, good grades and recom-

mendations, all while not spending too much time on their classes and still maintaining their health and happiness. There is a kind of tension, a contest, between students (aiming to do less) and faculty (hoping students do more), resulting in resistance and sometimes deception. At its most extreme, we find fraud, cheating, plagiarism, and a variety of other forms of corner-cutting. There are, of course, students who love learning, who love their classes, and who are eager to read more than is required—but these students are few. But what students are supposed to learn early on, what they are rewarded for learning at every level of schooling from preschool to college, is how to play what I call the game of school.

The game of school is derived from the late-nineteenth-century spread and standardization of school on the model of factories—as a number of writers have pointed out, including John Taylor Gatto in his book *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory School*. The goals of uniformity and universality, in compulsory schooling, have led to a system of credentials, curriculum, majors, requirements, credits, admission and intelligence tests, course examinations, grades and other forms of assessment.



Anthropologists like Marilyn Strathern who study this, have noted its development along with other aspects of contemporary life such as reliance on numbers as “indicators”, leading to a situation we refer to as “audit culture.” Indicators are needed in a competitive “neoliberal” society in which individuals are focused on maximizing their own positions vis-à-vis others. In this context, higher education has come to be regarded largely as a setting in which individuals may realize a “return on investment.” Other goals for education—citizenship, character, wisdom, awe—are increasingly seen as unaffordable luxuries for most students.

This game of sorting begins at birth, and those with advantages continue to build upon them throughout every level of schooling. In households where formal schooling has been mastered for generations, the knowledge of how to learn for schooling is passed along effortlessly. Others have to pick it up in the course of life.

It may be asked whether technology has transformed schooling for younger generations. There have been some minor transformations over the last fifty years, such as the use of calculators—and some major ones,

such as the ubiquity of cell phones, computer use for email, writing, research, examinations, and sometimes even the delivery of entire courses. But overall, there is something shockingly unchanged about the nature of school and what some analysts call “the grammar of schooling.” This is often unnoticed; others call it the “hidden curriculum,” the part of schooling that undergirds the entire enterprise. This has not really been touched by technology. Technological innovations may have changed the ways things are tracked, or how registration is done, and it may even make readings available online instead of in books. But these changes are trivial. The game remains the same.

The goal of the game of school is to accumulate points—ideally more than everyone else. Strategies are the main learning outcome of all those years of school. Anyone who flunks strategy basically flunks school. In classes, the points come from figuring out the specific version of the game that the teacher in that specific class has set up, in a kind of free-for-all where the rules change all the time. Here are some of the practical considerations necessary to master the game of school:

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<p>CLASS GO TO CLASS TO GET CREDIT</p>	<p><i>writing</i> YOU MUST CITE SOURCES</p>	<p><i>tests</i> YOU CAN USE NOTES IN THE TEST</p>	
	<p>PARTICIPATION GRADE POINTS FOR PARTICIPATING. DON'T FORGET!</p>	<p>HOMEWORK NO WORKING WITH OTHER PEOPLE. BOO.</p>	<p>PARTICIPATION YOU HAVE TO THE READINGS ADVANCE.</p>
<p>HOMEWORK YOU HAVE TO GET IT RIGHT TO GET CREDIT</p>	<p><i>gaming the numbers</i> KNOW YOUR NUMBERS! BE CLEAR ABOUT THE NUMBER OF CREDITS PER CLASS</p>	<p>SUCKING UP EMAIL THE TEACHER ABOUT SOMETHING OTHER THAN YOUR GRADE</p>	
<p>PROJECTS IS IT BETTER TO LET SOMEONE ELSE DO THE WORK IN GROUP PROJECT OR DO IT YOURSELF?</p>		<p>REQUIREMENTS PHYS ED COUNTS AS A SOCIAL SCIENCE. (CAN YOU COUNT YOUR YOGA CLASS? EXTRA POINTS HERE!)</p>	
<p>ATTENDANCE YOU HAVE TO SIGN IN-IN YOUR OWN HANDWRITING</p>	<p>HOMEWORK GET THE GRADE FOR TURNING IT IN</p>	<p>CLASS DOES YOUR PROF CARE IF YOU GO?</p>	
	<p>TESTS STUDY THE BREAKDOWN OF MULTIPLE CHOICE V. TRUE / FALSE V. SHORT ANSWER V. ESSAY V. PROBLEMS</p>	<p>WRITING SEND YOUR PAPER THROUGH A SO-CALLED PLAGIARISM DETECTOR</p>	<p>GAMING THE NUMBER CALCULATE HOW MUCH TIME REQUIRED NEEDED ON THAT</p>
<p>CLASS POWERPOINTS POSTED WEEKLY: NO NEED TO ATTEND</p>		<p>REQUIREMENTS YOU CAN USE A MAJOR COURSE AS A CORE DEGREE REQUIREMENT</p>	

O M A

<p>EXTRA CREDIT ATTEND A LECTURE</p>		<p>class PROF KNOWS YOUR NAME! BONUS</p>
<p>EXTRA CREDIT ASK ABOUT OTHER SOURCES OF EXTRA CREDIT</p>	<p>PARTICIPATION CATCH ON TO THE CONVERSATION AND JUST COMMENT. WELL DONE!</p>	
<p>homework HOMEWORK IS COLLECTED AND GRADED</p>	<p>WRITING SEE HOW FAR YOU GET BY CUTTING AND PASTING</p>	<p>extra CREDIT ASK ABOUT OTHER SOURCES OF EXTRA CREDIT</p>
<p>GAMING THE NUMBERS TAKE AN EASY COURSE AT COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND TRANSFER THE CREDITS IN FULL</p>	<p>SUCKING UP ALWAYS LAUGH AT THE PROF'S JOKES (GREASING WHEELS FOR A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION FOR GRAD SCHOOL ETC.)</p>	<p>gaming the NUMBERS FIND OUT IN ADVANCE: WHEN YOU TRANSFER, HOW MANY CREDITS DO YOU GET?</p>
<p>PARTICIPATION TEACHER INATTENTIVE: DO OTHER THINGS ON YOUR COMPUTER DURING LECTURE</p>	<p>TESTS KNOW AHEAD WHICH SECTION TO SPEND TIME ON IF RUNNING OUT OF TIME</p>	
<p>EXTRA CREDIT WRITE A FILM REVIEW AND/OR DO AN ACTUAL PROJECT</p>	<p>SUCKING UP TALK TO THE TEACHER BEFORE OR AFTER CLASS (OR EVEN IN OFFICE HOURS "GASP")</p>	<p>gaming the NUMBERS FIND OUT IN ADVANCE: WHEN YOU TRANSFER, HOW MANY CREDITS DO YOU GET?</p>
<p>WRITING SPECIFIC STYLE FORMAT (HOPEFULLY YOU KNOW IT ALREADY)</p>	<p>PROJECTS ARE GROUP PROJECTS GRADED FOR GROUP OR INDIVIDUALS?</p>	



The Game of School



And that's just the beginning...

Students also have to make sure they master the system of getting enough points to graduate, so they can cash them all in to get the coveted diploma—a credential. You need to keep track of the total number of credits, and of the way they are distributed. You need to have a clear eye on your grades, the worshipped GPA. You have to keep track of how each little chunk of school affects your GPA. If you begin with all As and once in college you get an A-, you will graduate with a GPA of only 3.99. (GPA does not at all correlate with post-school success or happiness, by the way!)

But there is also the other stuff in college—the social stuff, the cultural capital—that also ranks students and that savvy students know how to accumulate (mostly because they had it before they even got there). It's a little less clear-cut than the beautiful Platonic system of numbers: internships, service, clubs, performances, tutoring, summer gigs in Africa or South America—all these help prove that you are a person with many interests and skills, and they help you get contacts outside academia. When you go on to your next step, whether a job or more school, it will be helpful to have this. You may also like it.

But there are often rules there too: how many rehearsals can you miss before you're cut from the show? When do you have to turn in the report from your internship before you get reimbursed?

This is just a first approximation of the arcane detail that students must master. Nobody can claim that they don't learn anything in college! Look at all the rules, all the details, all the technical material.

It used to be the case that this was especially true in the United States, but thanks to a sense that higher education should be international, European countries have been changing their systems better to match that of the US. In 1999, an agreement called the Bologna Process aimed to "ensure more comparable, compatible and coherent systems of higher education in Europe." As a consequence, systems like that of the French or German—which didn't have credits or grades—have, with difficulty, been transforming into interchangeable modules—and assessments like the familiar American one. It used to be that students learned, and when they thought they had learned enough, they were evaluated. How they wanted to learn was their business. They could go to lectures or just read. Nobody told



them which pages to read. There were no attendance rolls. There were no credits for classes and no time limits. But this made it hard for students to switch from one system to another, so the US system is now becoming dominant. People will soon be able to swap one credit of history, with a passing grade, with another from anywhere in the world. All this is taking an established system—one that was only really institutionalized in the middle of the twentieth century in one place—and making it global.

So an anthropological look at the game of school shows the impressive expertise inculcated into successful students. Not everyone is successful, however. Some students miss the socialization into this set of rules. Perhaps for economic reasons, some people find it hard to manage the transportation to campus. Some struggle to collect enough funding to allow them to study semester after semester. Many can't afford to pay for internships for which they don't get credit. Some don't get the teacher's jokes. But the system is strong. It maintains its "standards" and, no matter what the reason, everyone is subject to the same evaluation. That's "meritocracy." The best are rewarded the most.

When critiques of higher education

circulate, they usually take for granted the game of school. But if we wish to foster learning for reasons beyond schooling itself, we might want to take a stern look at the game. What is the overall goal of school, besides perpetuation of its system? Where is it possible to squeeze out more learning, despite the centrality of the game? How can students find motivation for the joy of learning instead of the calculation of their GPA? How can teachers help students focus on the exploration and adventure of discovery, deflecting the focus from assessments?

There are no easy answers to these questions, but there are a few approaches that could improve things: more fun, curiosity, connection, usefulness, amazement; less emphasis on control and measurement; a greater sense of shared enterprise among all of us; and less regard for education as a zero-sum *game*. In short, the greater the connection between learning within the confines of schools and the more learning resembles the joyous learning that happens so comfortably outside schools, the more chance there is of fulfilling the noblest ideals that initially led to the establishment of our ungainly institutions of higher education.

Then who wins? Everyone. ■