MICHAEL WESCH

ANTI-TEACHING: CONFRONTING THE CRISIS OF SIGNIFICANCE

EN BREF **Les bonnes questions sont la force vive d'une réflexion critique et créative. Elles constituent donc l'un des meilleurs indicateurs d'un apprentissage significatif. Malheureusement, dans un système d'éducation en crise de signification, les élèves posent rarement les bonnes questions. Les questions courantes sont plutôt d'ordre administratif : « Quelle est la longueur du travail à remettre? », « Est-il obligatoire de participer? » ou pis encore (et plus couramment) : « Que faut-il savoir pour l'examen? ». Ces questions indiquent que, pour beaucoup d'élèves et d'enseignants, l'éducation est devenue un jeu de notes relativement dénué de sens. Mettre l'accent sur la qualité de l'apprentissage plutôt que sur la qualité de l'enseignement transforme le programme éducatif et trace une voie où les élèves s'engagent dans une exploration importante et significative du monde où nous vivons et que nous créons collectivement.**

The most significant problem with education today is the problem of significance itself. Students – our most important critics – are struggling to find meaning and significance in their education. I teach at a large public university in the United States, and I see the significance problem all around me. Last semester I invited my students to tell the world what they think of their education by helping me write a script for a video to be posted on YouTube. As part of the exercise, we created a survey measuring student involvement and engagement in various learning activities. On average, our survey sample of 131 students reported reading less than half of the assigned readings, and further perceived only 26 percent of the readings to be relevant to their lives. Others noted that they often buy hundred dollar textbooks that they never open and pay for classes that they never attend. The video, "A Vision of Students Today" was viewed over one million times in its first month and was the most blogged about video in the blogosphere for several weeks, eliciting thousands of comments. With rare exception, educators around the world expressed the sad sense of profound identification with the scene.

The signs of the significance problem extend beyond the classroom scenes captured in the video and permeate our everyday conversations in ways many of us do not recognize. Consider the often-heard lament, "some students are just not cut out for school." The statement passes without question or even a hint of protest, yet think about what the statement says when we replace "school" with what school should be all about: "learning." Some students are just not cut out for *learning*? Nobody would dare make the statement. Learning is the hallmark of humanity. We are all cut out for learning. It is what makes us human. If our students are "not cut out for school", perhaps we have made the mold too narrow or inflexible, or more likely, just not meaningful enough to inspire a student to fit in. That's the significance problem.

If you want to see the significance problem first hand, visit a classroom and pay attention to the types of questions asked by students. Good questions are the driving force of critical and creative thinking and therefore one of the best indicators of significant learning. Good questions are those that force students to challenge their taken-for-granted assumptions and see their own underlying biases. Oftentimes the answer to a good question is irrelevant – the question is an insight in itself. The only answer to the best questions is another good question. And so the best questions send students on rich and meaningful lifelong quests, question after question after question.

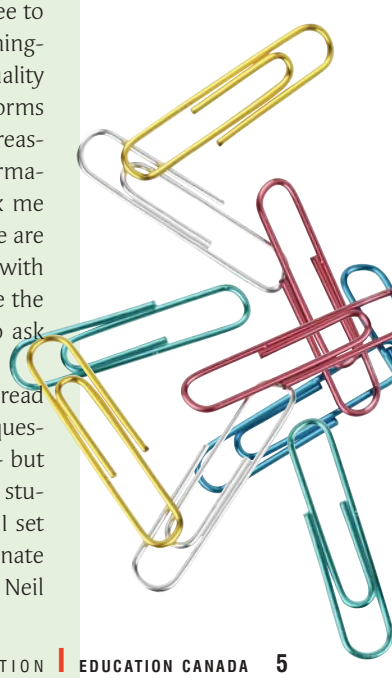
Unfortunately, such great questions are rarely asked by students in an education system facing a crisis of significance. Much more common are administrative questions: "How long does this paper need to be?" "Is attendance mandatory?" Or the worst (and most common) of all: "What do we need to know for this test?" Such questions reflect the fact that, for many (students and teachers alike), education has become a relatively meaningless game of grades rather than an important and meaningful exploration of the world in which we live and co-create.

Contrary to many of my faculty peers, I do not blame the students themselves for asking these kinds of questions. As teachers we have created and continue to maintain an education system that inevitably produces them. If we accept John Dewey's notion that people learn what they do, the lecture format, which is the mainstay of teaching (especially in large introductory courses), teaches students to sit in neat rows and to respect, believe, and defer to authority (the teacher). Tests often measure little more than how well they can recite what they have been told. Hoping to memorize only just as much as necessary to succeed on the test, they ask that question I never want to hear – the ultimate exception to the rule that "there is no such thing as a bad question." Frustrated with this question, and hoping to get my students to ask better ones, I decided to get to work creating a learning environment more conducive to producing the types of questions that create lifelong learners rather than savvy test-takers.

I HAVE TOYED WITH THE IDEA OF CALLING WHAT I DO "ANTI-TEACHING", AS I HAVE COME TO THE CONCLUSION THAT "TEACHING" CAN ACTUALLY BE A HINDRANCE TO LEARNING.

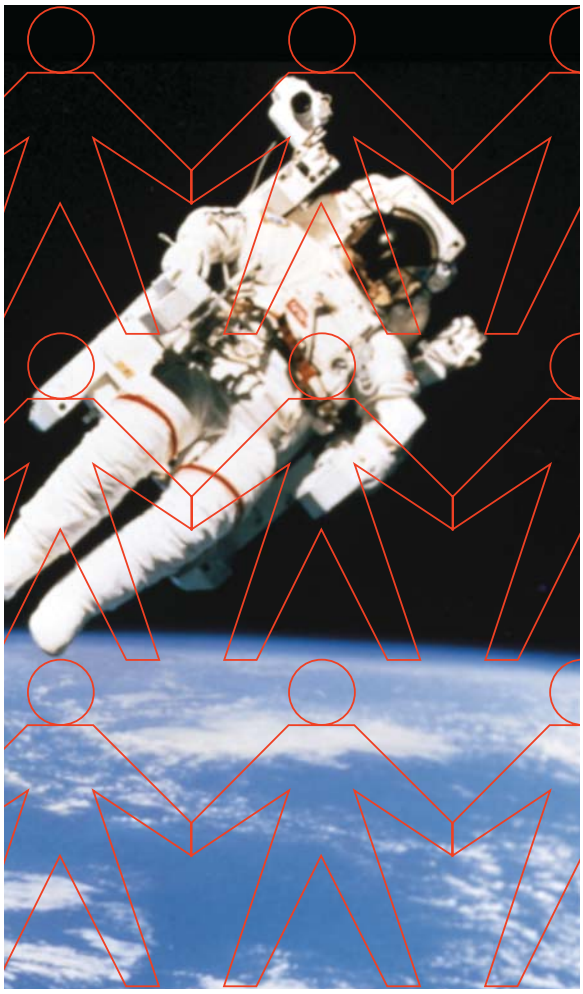
Since I dedicated myself to this task, I have found myself doing some odd things in the classroom. In fact, my classroom has started to look less and less like a classroom; my teaching, less and less like teaching. I have even toyed with the idea of calling what I do "anti-teaching", as I have come to the conclusion that "teaching" can actually be a hindrance to learning, especially when it is assumed that learning requires it. As most of us know from our own experience, the best learning almost always occurs in the absence of a teacher, for it is then that learners are free to pursue with great passion the questions that are meaningful and relevant to their own lives. Focusing on the quality of *learning*, rather than the quality of *teaching* transforms the entire educational agenda. As for myself, I have increasingly focused less on simply trying to convey good information and more on inspiring good questions. It struck me that all learning begins with a good question, and if we are ultimately trying to create "active lifelong learners" with "critical thinking skills" and an ability to "think outside the box" it might be best to start by getting students to ask better questions.

Unfortunately, I didn't know where to start. I have read and heard a great deal of advice on how to ask good questions of students – non-rhetorical, open-ended, etc. – but nobody has ever told me anything about how to get students to ask good questions. Fortunately, soon after I set out on this course I found a book that seemed to resonate with my philosophy, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* by Neil



Postman and Charles Weingartner. Borrowing from Marshal McLuhan's famous aphorism, "the medium is the message," Postman and Weingartner argue that the environment (or medium) of learning is more important than the content (the message), and therefore teachers should begin paying more attention to the learning environment they help to create. The emphasis is on "managing" this environment rather than simply conveying information.

This is not in any way a cop out of "real" teaching. In fact, approaching a class of nearly 500 as a "manager" is a tremendous task. It would be much easier to simply give in to tradition and deliver a standard lecture. But while the sheer numbers of students is a burden in one sense, there is also tremendous potential. Think of the knowledge and life experience in that single room, if only I could find a way to harness it! I wanted the students to be fully engaged, talking to one another, grappling with interesting questions, and exploring any and all resources to find answers, and more importantly, more questions.



The raw materials I have at hand to create this environment are a complicating factor. The physical structure of the classrooms in which I work simply does not inspire dialogue and critical thinking. They are physical manifestations of the pervasive narrow and naïve assumption that learning is simple information gathering, built for teachers to effectively carry out the relatively simple task of conveying information. Nearly five hundred chairs in neat orderly rows face a massive stage. A small podium houses a microphone, computer, and a wireless gyromouse that controls some 786,432 points of light on the massive screen at the front of the room. Like most classes taught in this room, my Introduction to Cultural Anthropology class fulfills several requirements, so many students arrive with the hope of putting forth the minimal effort required to get the grade and get out. The structure of the room seems to suggest that university administrators may have a similar agenda, as the room's sheer size, layout, and technology are landmarks of the efficiency and expediency with which we can now provide students with their required credit hours.

Nobody who seriously values learning could be anything but subversive in such an environment, and I have constantly grinded against this structure in my quest to create a better learning environment. Students end up sitting backwards on the backs of the fixed chairs or climbing over and around them as we struggle to create a more interactive space. More than once I have received calls from the janitorial staff wondering just what was going on in my classroom. I have even tried turning over the control of those 786,432 points of light on the screen to the students themselves, using a hacked mix of online social media like wikis, Twitter, Jott, and Facebook to turn their cell phones and laptops into a local learning network.

At a deeper level these are little more than simple parlour tricks. They make up a rather creative and interesting *means* of learning, but not a *reason* for learning. They do not address that most significant problem, the problem of significance.

Neil Postman pointed the way to this problem over ten years ago in his provocative book, *The End of Education*. Meaning and significance are assured only when our learning fits in with a grand narrative that motivates and guides us. In the past, religious narratives could serve this purpose, or narratives of national progress. Sometimes national and religious narratives co-existed and mutually reinforced one another. In the US, we now are witnessing the last vestiges of these grand narratives in court battles over school prayer and fears that the country is "falling behind", but the reality is that, for a substantial portion of the population, these narratives have been dead for a long time and no longer serve. They are simply not grand enough to grapple with an increasingly global, post-industrial, media-saturated world, and not grounded enough to pass the necessary and healthy skepticism towards grand narratives that we find in an increasingly diverse and informed public. As our focus shifts from the national to the global, our grand narratives must also shift.

Fortunately there is a meaningful narrative that has been emerging all around us over the past several decades. It is rarely named and therefore not often noticed. Nonetheless it is there, waiting for anybody interested in creating a meaningful learning environment to harness and bring significance back into the classroom. It is the grand narrative grand enough to make the others seem small, grounded enough to pass under the radar of our skepticism toward grand narratives. It is the simple narrative that tells us that beyond our own provincial grand narratives we are all interconnected, sharing one planet, and that our future depends on us and future generations. In the 1960s Buckminster Fuller harnessed this narrative by popularizng the concept of Spaceship Earth.

WHEN STUDENTS RECOGNIZE THEIR OWN IMPORTANCE IN HELPING TO SHAPE THE FUTURE OF THIS INCREASINGLY GLOBAL, INTERCONNECTED SOCIETY, THE SIGNIFICANCE PROBLEM FADES AWAY.

A simple check on the status of Spaceship Earth can bring meaning and significance to education by allowing us to see the big picture of the world in which we live and co-create. Using the now classic metaphor, if we imagine all of human evolution to have occurred in the past hour, the last 500 years is no more than a few tenths of a second. While these final tenths have brought us tremendous technological advances, they have also brought us unparalleled global inequality, the most deadly wars of all time, and a pre-carious environmental situation. Our population is more than 10 times what it was just a few short tenths of a second ago. The richest 225 humans on earth have more wealth than the poorest 2.5 billion people combined, and the richest 20 percent of humans on earth account for 86 percent of consumption and on average make over $25,000/year. Meanwhile, 1.2 billion people make less than $1/day and over half the world makes less than $2/day. Humans produce more than enough food to feed everyone in the world, but at least 800 million people are starving.

In 2004, worldwide military expenditures were $950 billion. In that same year, Worldwatch estimated that it would cost just $12 billion for reproductive health care for all women, $19 billion for the elimination of hunger and malnutrition, $10 billion for clean drinking water for all, and $13 billion to immunize every child in the world from common major diseases.

In these final few tenths of a second, we have created a global economy running on non-renewable fossil fuels, all of which will be gone within the next second on our imaginary clock. The use of these fuels has increased carbon dioxide levels by almost 30 percent, nitrous oxide by about 15 percent, and concentrations of methane have more than doubled – all of which contribute to a rise in global temperature leading to rising sea levels, expanding deserts, and more intense storms.

Perhaps most dramatic, it is in these final tenths of a second on our metaphorical clock that we human beings have attained the ability to literally stop the clock and annihilate ourselves. Whether or not the clock keeps ticking into the next hour will largely be up to the students in our classrooms today. This is no small task they face. It may take an almost complete reinvention of how we live and a total revision of how we see the world and our fellow human beings.

When students recognize their own importance in helping to shape the future of this increasingly global, interconnected society, the significance problem fades away. But simply telling them this narrative is not enough. The narrative must become pervasive in the learning environment. There are many ways to do this. I'll conclude by briefly introducing my own method: the World Simulation.

When students walk into my classroom, they are literally entering a different world, complete with all of the cultural and natural diversity of our own real world. A world map is laid onto a map of the classroom, and students are asked to imagine themselves living in the cultural and physical environment that maps onto them. Each student becomes our resident expert on some specific aspect of a location in our world. The ultimate goal of the course is relatively simple: figure out how the world works. But rather than me telling them how it works, students work together to help design a two-hour simulation of the last 500 years of world history, using props for currencies, natural resources, and other elements that recreate the world system.

Questions loom over every single aspect of the creation of this simulation, and because I do not know everything and the simulation attempts to simulate everything, I am in the wonderful but awkward position of not knowing exactly what I am doing but blissfully learning along the way. My job becomes less about teaching, and more about encouraging students to join me on the quest.

Students record the simulation on twenty digital video cameras and we collectively edit the material into one final "world history" video using clips from real history to illustrate the correspondences. We watch the video together during the last week of class as we contemplate our world. By then it seems as if we have the whole world right before our eyes in one single classroom – profound cultural differences, profound economic differences, profound challenges for the future...and one humanity. We find ourselves as co-creators of our world, and the future is up to us. It is in this environment that even the worst questions take on all the characteristics of the best: What do we need to know for this test?

Dubbed "the explainer" by *Wired* magazine, MICHAEL WESCH is a cultural anthropologist at Kansas State University exploring the impacts of new media on human interaction. His videos on technology and education have been viewed over six million times. He is also a multiple-award winning teacher whose teaching projects have been featured in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and other major media outlets worldwide.