

I felt passion for the first time today; so fervent it brought me to tears. I was on the phone with my academic advisor from my home school (The Urban School of San Francisco), searching for a way to express my newly realized feelings of discontent with Urban and my life in San Francisco. These feelings, along with a host of other revelations, have come to my attention during my time at Oxbow because the curriculum entails extensive reflection and introspection, while the physical separation from home grants me a new perspective on my life and my self. Thus, Oxbow has heightened my self-awareness and propensity to think critically about the world around me.

I liken the maturation I've undergone to a concept called *Bildung*. As explained by Hegel, *Bildung* is the formative self-development of mind and spirit in the German tradition of self-cultivation. Hegel claims that in order to mature and reconcile oneself with society, a person must first become self-aware, by realizing their individual values, identity, beliefs, aspirations, and potential.¹ *Bildung* is simultaneously a process of self-transformation and an acquisition of the power to grasp and articulate the reasons for what one believes or knows.

During Moe's history class, I was asked for the first time to consider myself in terms of my beliefs, identity, and moral code—in other words, my culture. Seemingly straightforward prompts (i.e. write about one belief you hold, write about your own moral code) had me stumped; I journaled and brainstormed in a desperate search for my convictions, but the only one I came to apprehend is that I *don't* feel I have a culture, or a conception of my spirituality. In this instance and others, I was forced to reflect on my worldview and myself in depth, and, in doing so, I learned more about myself than in my entire school career combined.

I have been told on many occasions how lucky I am to have spent my formative years in small private schools. Now, when I try to explain my dissatisfaction with Urban, it's rare that anyone takes me seriously. They tell me that I must appreciate Urban: it's so much more intellectually stimulating than a poorly funded public school, and Oxbow isn't real. I am confounded by this answer, as Oxbow *is* real, and, though it doesn't resemble any conventional model of education, I believe that the difference between Oxbow and Urban is equal to the difference between Urban and poorly funded public schools. I'm not sure of this, as I've never attended a public school, but I can speak for my experience and what I think benefits me most as an individual.

In the private school model, small size and high cost make for a high-pressure environment. Here, there is no margin for error; to be wrong, uncertain, or confused is a waste of time and money. Further, while the state of the public school system in America is a subject of continuous debate and criticism, the "progressive" educators and administrators I have worked with are often snobby and self-righteous; because they consider themselves experts on child development, they are not inclined to adapt their style of teaching or communication to a student's individual needs. Instead of helping me in the way I need, teachers have always told me I make things hard for myself.

Welcome to Presidio Hill School's Lower School, *where caring and talented teachers guide students on an exciting journey of discovery. As at all grade levels, the Lower School program is designed to engage students in their own learning and encourage each student's natural curiosity. A project-based curriculum nurtures a love of learning in students and emphasizes the value of exploration and discovery.*²

¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, London, Oxford, 1977

² <http://www.presidiohill.org/academics/philosophy/index.aspx>

On the first day of Kindergarten, my teacher wore a grey t-shirt, and taught the class: “You come to school to learn!” Thus, my inaugural lesson was that of the separation between living and learning; I was led to believe that learning could only be done at school, with the instruction of a teacher, and failed to recognize the infinitely harder learning I had already done by myself in the business of making sense of the world and gaining competence in it.

The development of my brain, language, and motor skills, all of which are of immeasurable importance, were not taught to me, but resulted from firsthand experience and hands-on experimentation. Yet, on the first day of Kindergarten, I sat on a blue carpet assuming I was inept, inexperienced, and would be until after I graduated college. I wish I could say this belief arose out of first-day jitters, and quickly dissipated, but I regretfully concede that it stuck with me through well into my high school career.

***The Presidio Hill School Tenets of Educational Philosophy:*³**

1. Educating the Whole Child

“We work with the social and emotional sides of the child, helping to develop healthy social lives and the emotional intelligence necessary for a productive and fulfilling life.”

In first grade, I was told that I could no longer spend time with my best friend; I was smothering her. She and I were assigned separate playgrounds to play in during recess, and were surveyed constantly to ensure we wouldn’t and couldn’t converge. I cried, begged, pleaded with my teacher in protest, until she arranged for me to see a therapist every Monday after school.

2. Focusing on Understanding

“More important than memorization is understanding. With understanding, a student is able to be discerning and creative, make connections, and transfer information to new situations.”

Later that year, I learned to cheat: stashing flashcards in my jeans’ pockets to refer to during spelling tests when my teacher turned her back. I was only seven years old, but I already knew there was no space in the classroom for wrong answers.

3. Individualizing the Learning Process

“At its heart, the notion of progressive education is that each child has unique interests and desires and our job as adults and educators is to help the child discover and develop those areas. Contrast this philosophy with the more common traditional, or “blank slate” model that posits the child as an empty vessel to be filled with facts and procedures adults think are important, regardless of the child’s interests and desires.”

My teacher took the worksheet on which I was drawing and exchanged it for a new one, “See how your neighbor is connecting the dots? That’s how you get the right picture; follow the numbers.”

4. Encouraging Active Engagement

“Children learn best when they are actively engaged. John Dewey, a progressive educator at the turn of the last century, made famous the aphorism “children learn by doing.” Engagement

³ Ibid, 2

is fostered when the material being learned is meaningful, the teacher is enthusiastic and skilled, there is some fun involved, and the student has some choice.”

The bell rang; kids began traipsing back to class, but I stayed perched in the corner of the sandbox, reaching for purple flowers. I had just discovered these flowers two or three minutes earlier, peeking out through my schoolyard’s fence. I held one to my nose and it was fragrant, so I held it to my lips and, miraculously, found it was sweet. Someone called to me from the classroom, “It’s time to come in!” but I didn’t answer; I was immersed in my own experience: of independence, of nature, of a personal and delightful moment of discovery. I picked another flower, drew its petals close to my face, and ran them, soft, against the edge of my chin, and sucked out their sweet juice. The next flower I found was dry, and I examined them all up close, trying to discern where the sweetness was coming from, and what, exactly, it was. I took such delight in finding these pouches of flower-juice, and the frustration I felt at their unsatisfying size did not discourage but actually drove me to keep searching, sucking, and occasionally being rewarded with my sweet, fleeting prize. A stern hand landed on the slope of my shoulder: “Lucie! Recess is over!”

5. Emphasizing Process Over Product

“The process is more important than the product. Product is inevitably involved, but our focus is on teaching children a repertoire of problem-solving skills and a knowledge of how they learn best.”

My second-grade math curriculum revolved around worksheets, wherein each numerical answer reached by a student corresponded with a letter, like a code. These letters would spell out the answer to a riddle at the top of the worksheet. I conned my way out of the work by guessing the answer to the riddle, and applying the key in reverse, so I could then go back and fill in the numerical answers, making it look like I had done work that I hadn’t.

6. Creating Community

“The community of the school shapes thinking, feeling, and behavior. Parents, teachers, and fellow students all impact a child’s development. Caring and compassionate community members with a common purpose create the environment in which we wish our children to grow.”

My fourth grade teacher expressed concern to my parents about my behavioral and learning tendencies; she told them she thought I might have ADD or ADHD, and would benefit from medication. My mom was indignant at the suggestion, which she perceived as presumptuous and belittling. She argued that drug companies were overdramatizing adolescent disobedience for profit, and cited my ERB test scores as evidence of my intelligence and ability to focus. I informed her that I had cheated on my ERB’s, copying off of the smart boy who sat next to me. As my father began berating me for my dishonesty, I broke down, overwhelmed at the enigma: should I admit I am stupid and need medication, or should I admit I am dishonest, but self-reliant? I screamed I was a bad kid either way, but my dad said this was an irresponsible conclusion because I wasn’t bad by nature; I was just making the wrong choices. I screamed I was going to kill myself and he let me be.

By the time I reached middle school I had learned I was worthless, untrustworthy, and fit only to take my teachers’ orders. Nothing of my individual nature—my experience, concerns,

curiosities, needs, interests, nor shortcomings—was of any worth in the context of my school environment. What counted was what my teachers knew of me, expected of me, or thought I should develop or change. In middle school, I spent more time in my dean’s office than I did in the classroom. Insolent, distracting, and selfish, I was a waste of my school’s time and resources. With no opportunity to explain or comprehend my behavior or identity, I had no chance to find out who I was and came to accept the adults’ evaluation of me.

Therefore, I posit that my lack of passions, interests, values, moral code, and sense of self is a consequence of the way I have been schooled; that the structure of my formal education has alienated me from my inner spirit. I have never been expected or allowed to determine my own purpose or means of achieving it, so I don’t know how to do so, and I’m not prone to try. School has alienated me from my spirituality and intellect, trained me never to work outside of institutional expectation or instruction, and fettered my creative and independent thinking. At Oxbow I have had teachers express concern, not in a disciplinary or critical way, but by coming to me with the goal of understanding my behaviors and helping me if I want to change them.

I believe that the self-alienation of our current model of education is exhibited in the fact that authority figures approach children as something “other”: ignorant undeserving blobs of clay waiting to be molded into intelligent members of society. I agree with Hegel in his statement that, “the contemporary culture of individuals in modern society consists in their devoting themselves to the end of the state⁴.” Thus, self-realization is not valued and is in fact lost. In my experience, the classroom dynamic takes precedent over my individual needs and I am not given the requisite time to make mistakes or learn from them. Also, I feel that much of what I learn at Urban is impractical knowledge, especially because of the stringent curriculum and emphasis on grading. In this way, I feel that Urban is a constraining environment.

Another constraint at Urban is my friend group there. While I love my friends as individuals, together they comprise a social scene that demands a lot of energy. At Oxbow I have learned the value of solitude, and I have also spent time making art with friends or having conversations instead of partying for the sake of partying. Because so many of the kids I spend time with at Urban are from wealthy families, they are often unmotivated to innovate, engage in activism, or pursue pastimes that don’t directly benefit their chances of getting into a college or of gaining social status.

Since realizing all this, I am losing motivation to keep trying and failing within a school system that I’m not fit for. I feel that I’m a ball of potential energy that must be experimented with, instead of being thrown up against the same school wall, which is burning me out and wasting my potential. Conversely, the freedom Oxbow has allowed me in my creative and academic pursuits has fostered unprecedented maturation of both my intellect and spirit. As a result, I have come to regard this model of education as sacrosanct to my personal and academic development.

My current frustration lies in the enigma: I don’t know what to do next. As Oxbow is coming to an end, there are limited opportunities for me to continue the type of education I have been receiving here. In an effort to solve this enigma, I focused my final inquiry on contemplating my ideal educational model, conducting research on both progressive and classical pedagogies.

One text I studied was Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s treatise on education, *Émilie*. The education Rousseau proposes in this volume involves working only with a private tutor and studying and reading only what the pupil is curious about—only that which is “useful” or “pleasing” to the pupil. Rousseau explains that in this manner, the pupil would essentially educate himself and be excited about learning.⁵ Many others hold similar beliefs. John Dewey, the progenitor of progressive

⁴ Ibid, 1 pg. 494

⁵ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. "Emile, or On Education." <I>Full Text: Rousseau’s Treatise on Education</i>. N.p., n.d. Web. 2 Dec. 2013. <https://archive.org/stream/RousseausemileOrOnEducationbloom/Rousseau-Emile_djvu.txt>.

education as we know it, states that education must revolve around “the immediate instincts and activities of the child himself.”⁶ My ideal model of education would exclude the academic “body of knowledge” traditionally taught in schools—which is useless in a world as complicated and rapidly changing as ours—in exchange for practical and/or personally compelling knowledge that would help me make sense of the world and get along in it. Instead of trivial facts, my curriculum would revolve around skills to benefit me in the world outside of school, such as communication, innovation, and application. My ideal learning environment would not revolve around a teacher’s schedule or curriculum, but give me ownership of my learning. Freedom and authority over my pacing and topics of study would more effectively immerse and engage me in my education.

Beyond subject matter, I would further immerse myself through specific methods of learning. According to Hegel, learning occurs not primarily through the imparting of information by a teacher, but instead through experience. That way, the learning process becomes singularly self-realized, as what is familiar is not rationally cognized. As a pupil experiences something hands-on, and overcomes a struggle to apprehend a concept through his own experience, what was merely accepted as given is now seen as the product of a process of thought, and is justified through the pupil’s own thinking.⁷ Rousseau holds a similar belief, stating, “An hour of work will teach the pupil more things than he would retain from a day of explanations.”⁸ Ideally, I would be an active participant in my education by learning through experience.

My Amalgamated High School Course Report

Lucie: your frank assessment of your work in and out of class this term shows... you are quite attuned to... my expectations. One area that needs much greater focus on your part is your in-class demeanor.

You sometimes skipped over homework assignments and had to catch up. You also struggled sometimes with documenting your thinking, leaving out explanations to better support your answers. Also, you often succumbed to social distractions, tardiness, and disorganization... but I believe you will be more productive... when you can get out of your own way. Slowly but surely, you are... developing the discipline and focus that will provide structure for you in the future.

You are certainly a strong enough student to have done well in this class, but... your work was that of a person with too much to say and not enough time to say it. You frequently ran out of time during tests, and the points I deducted for blank answers significantly... thwarted your scholarship. You had potential, but I encourage you to consider suppressing your... capacious intellect... instead of tackling so many ideas at once. Slow down. If you can manage to have a bit more control/discipline... you may begin to think about your future as a... productive group member.

Unfortunately, yes, this class is progressive, so it will be very difficult for you to make up for the gaps in understanding that you accumulated during the first half of this term, as the class moves on... without checking your understanding.

⁶ John Dewey. "The School and the Life of the Child," Chapter 2 in *The School and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (1907): 47-73

⁷ Stojanov, K. n. page. <<http://www.philosophy-of-education.org/uploads/papers2012/Stojanov.pdf>>.

⁸ Ibid, 5

In my experience, a notable obstacle to my receiving a personalized education has been the grading system. This system necessitates standardized measures of competency, such as timed tests and formatting requirements that do not always reflect true apprehension or competency. Aiming for a good grade in a class is rarely relevant to my personal intellectual understanding or mastery of a concept. My ideal education would entail me fulfilling daily requirements in terms of academic practice, as it is pivotal to my success in college, and beyond that I would develop practices of resilience, self-control, and professionalism. My competency, rather than graded, would be measured as in a real world setting, where I would learn from my mistakes and how to avoid them in the future by observing their cause and effect.

In being made the own judge of my competency, I would retain information on an individual basis and apply it on the same basis henceforth. I would learn not through memorization, but through understanding, so I would never forget a concept, but, rather, would internalize it. By extension, this level of understanding would foster my creativity because I would be more inclined to make individual connections between diverse subjects. Instead of confining my intellect to a teacher's grade-book, I strive to become a self-reliant student, with freedom over my methods, style, and subjects of learning. In doing so, I would cultivate skills to benefit me for the rest of my life, such as ambition, resourcefulness, professionalism, resilience, and creativity.

Unfortunately, a decade's worth of experience has brought me to the conclusion that the conventional classroom environment is a detriment to my personal and intellectual development. While Oxbow has been a great experience and a nearly ideal environment, it's only a semester program. As I prepare to leave, I'm still unsure what the next step in my education and personal development should be. Ultimately, my goal is to find an environment that will potentiate my intellectual and personal capacities as I move forward. Therefore, accreditation, in the form of a high school diploma and the opportunity to attend a good college, is a prerequisite for any program I choose to attend in place of Urban.

While I have yet to find a program that fulfills all my ideals—I'm not even sure exactly what this model would look like—I have come across a number of alternatives to the traditional high-school experience, including pre-college programs, democratic schools, and online classes. Unfortunately, with each of these programs, their downsides have outweighed their benefits, as my needs for freedom and structure are difficult to reconcile within a learning environment. The one viable option I have discovered in my research, and am actually quite enthusiastic about, is a yearlong traveling-abroad program called Leap Now.⁹ Unlike any other program I have come across, Leap Now incorporates extensive personal and spiritual exploration, which would develop the non-cognitive skills I value and desire. I believe the future of education lies in programs like Leap Now, where education will be individualized and will encourage the skills of creativity and collaboration that our current system of education effectively suppresses.

⁹ "LEAPYEAR | College Gap Year Alternative Education Program Study Abroad | LEAPNOW." *LEAPYEAR | College Gap Year Alternative Education Program Study Abroad | LEAPNOW*. N.p., n.d. Web. 4 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.leapnow.org/leapyear/>>.

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