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The secondary-level teacher as cultural ambassador and cultural product: How complex socio-political times require a more complex teacher identity

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The role of literature and culture in the future teacher's curriculum has changed mightily from days when canonical works of literature were introduced, read and analyzed for its didactic content or, at other times, for its exploration and insight into social movements and causes. In fulfilling the requirements of the undergraduate teaching curriculum, a student in a teaching programme was expected to read the classics and to become well-versed in the works of the literary canon, but beyond studying what was considered to be the great novels, however, and choosing in turn what to pass down to their own students, teachers had limited use for literature in the English classroom. Fast forward to the 21st century, and it is obvious that many facets of social change and upheaval have had repercussions on society in general, and on the teaching profession in particular. This is why in light of these sea-changes, the secondary level teachers' professional identity needs to be re-examined and reified so that their undergrad education will be a source of support and information, and not just a skeleton to be filled in haphazardly.

The relationship of the high school student with his or her teacher is undisputedly one of the most important cultural relationships the student will ever have. Unless one is highly invested in Canadian politics or is a genuine history buff, one will not readily remember the Prime Minister of Canada in 1986 without a bit of thought. Bad or good, our memories of our high school teachers are mostly vivid as most of us are invested in personal and family politics. The importance of teachers is undebatable; educators have recognized the vocation within. No matter what discipline they teach, they are privy to great frustration

and angst related to their career choice at one time or another, but also to moments of joy when they feel they have awakened an interest or a passion in their students. In *The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload,* McGill University professor Daniel Levitin explains how neurologists have discovered that every time we learn something new, our brains are programmed to deliver a dose of dopamine to the brain. Love of learning, writes Levitin, seems to be something humans are hard-wired to do, and something teachers have wanted to foster in their own students at every level and in every period of history.

The image of these teachers has changed a lot over the centuries, from the days when women could enter the teaching profession when they were young and single, up to the day when she got married. A teacher had to have an impeccable reputation, a pleasant appearance and be worthy of the community's respect. The image of the Kindergarten to Grade 12 teacher has been a recurrent trope in popular culture media; everyone in our North American context has had (or at least knows of) a school teacher. What has not changed, however (or very little), is the structural constellation of teachers and their students. While this organization is modified from time to time in terms of number, gender distribution or social context, what remains the same is the teacher who heads the classroom. While everything around her changes, adapts, progresses or regresses, the teacher remains the anchor and the bulwark.

The Culture/Education Symbiosis

It is undeniable that there is no clear-cut separation between academe and culture; indeed, since the work of the early culturalists (Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams and Stanley Fisch, to name a few) has made abundantly clear, the education system is situated squarely in the midst of "ordinary" culture. Education exists in a sphere of its own, of course, but overlaps significantly with family, the extracurricular and, to a far lesser extent in Quebec, religion. We must also undoubtedly add personal identity (and the identity politics that stem from it) to the considerations of the secondary-level curriculum. To complicate matters even further, we need to factor in technology and its myriad uses as well as social media in its various incarnations (Instagram, Facebook, TicToc, What's

App, Snapchat, etc.). Each one of these applications can do good but can also wreak havoc. For example, a great deal of research on social media and its impact is being carried out today; one might consider, for example, the question of the influence of Instagram on self-worth, or the role Facebook plays every day in bullying and slander. These issues are in litigation even as we speak. But social media does not simply disappear when students are in class. Because of the highly communicative nature of social media, students are kept in a virtual web no matter where they are, and in order to engage with their students, teachers have to speak and understand the social media dialectic, especially how it is transmitted through popular culture. This is a contemporary vintage of literature and its cultural kin and how they are used. These offerings include new incarnations of musical expression (rap, slam, spoken-word), film (both Hollywood mainstream and avant-garde cinema) and video games, to name a few. University faculty conceiving and building a curriculum for future language teachers graduating from their programmes must necessarily introduce and encourage critical thinking and social analysis—endeavors that will serve them well in their role as teachers, using classic, canonical or contemporary media.

One might ask, however, how far into the cultural tapestry the newly minted high-school teacher needs to venture. We may ponder how much “extra learning” is necessary. A teacher’s role today constantly navigates between the antipodes of authority figure and that of guardian angel where educators are sometimes called upon to either regress to the age-old stereotype of authoritarian pedagogue or, conversely, to relinquish the right to correct and admonish without reprisal. The 2006 CTV documentary, *Unsafe to Teach,* introduces us to about 10 teachers, working and retired, who have suffered bullying at the hands of students and their parents. One teacher was terrified into retirement, while most of the others are either active in their communities to try to find a solution to the nightmare that is bullying, or very much looking forward to leaving the profession altogether. We learn from this documentary that one of the solutions is to get the teachers a little more training in self-defense/a little more training in crisis management/a little more training in weapons expertise/a little more training in emergency medical care. This conclusion is clearly unfeasible.

How to Make a Good Teacher?

An article that appeared in *The Economist* on June 11, 2016, entitled “How to Make a Good Teacher” takes the spirit of the “a little more training” school of thought to greater lengths by suggesting that good teachers, such as those described in the article, have been “drilled in the craft of the classroom”. Instead of “spending their time musing on the meaning of education”. These teachers, we are told, have graduated from the Relay School of Graduate Education which applies lessons from cognitive science, medical education, and sports training to the *business* of supplying better teachers (italics mine). The author suggests increasing the accountability of teachers by hiring/firing them and increasing or decreasing teachers’ salaries based on their students’ performance as indicated by the students’ marks. The author believes that many popular techniques do not work and decries “unearned praise”, “grouping by ability” and “accepting children’s different learning styles”. The author also blames a theory-heavy curriculum which is light on classroom practice. The new teaching schools, he indicates, can impart skills in advance. The author quotes one of the pioneers of these commercial teacher-training centres who claims that “he and his colleagues have crunched good teaching into a taxonomy of things to do and say”. This expertise is quantified into 5000 things that “go into amazing teaching”. The school guarantees that you will walk out with the 250 most important. The specific techniques number 62.

This information may seem to some to be quite pat and militaristic. The general consensus reached in Québec (and in many other parts of the world) does not boil teaching down to a simple technique or method, but rather a philosophy, an ideology, or a methodology (or a blend of the above) with which students might want to approach the teaching profession, bolstered and underpinned by education research and scholarship. The technical approach to teaching teachers has been foregone in lieu of a more holistic approach. There are, indeed, many ways to view the world. Students of language education are individuals from all walks of life and disciplines who will eventually be confronting younger, more impressionable versions of themselves.

Conclusion – Québec Culture at the Forefront

The student graduating from programmes which offer language teacher-training must necessarily embrace elements of the culture of the language they will be teaching. The professional identity of newly-minted pedagogues must necessarily include a study of, and appreciation for, the culture in which the language they are teaching is embedded. The secondary-level teacher is not simply a machine or a well-trained performer of tricks and techniques. Language teachers do not only impart verb tenses, vocabulary and pronunciation. They have to have an appreciation, if not a passion, for the language they are teaching. On the eve of the implementation of a selection of new courses added to the high-school students' curriculum, Québec Minister of Education Jean-François Roberge explained that "*les langues sont porteuses de cultures*". The new course "*Culture et citoyenneté québécoise*" admonishes its teachers to focus on concepts such as gender equality, advancement opportunity for all, the notion and practice of consent, a greater focus on dialogue and critical thinking, knowledge of the law and basic human rights, and a greater understanding of the role of social media. Mr. Roberge specifically singled out language teachers as ambassadors *par excellence* to teach these pivotal and unavoidable topics. He insisted that it was necessary "*d'apprendre aux écoles à aborder des questions sensibles*". This necessity is actually a non-negotiable; circumstances beyond our control, such as inevitable progress and the advent of social media, have dictated that our high-school teachers need the tools with which to deal with a society that has decidedly turned away from the structures and strictures of religion and subscribed wholeheartedly to the influence of globalization and diversity.

Areas of consideration and development might include, but are not limited to

- gender issues and the identity spectrum
- indigenous issues and our role in their politics
- racism and its myriad manifestations
- bullying students and students bullying teachers
- the emergence of hate and polarization
- Critical Race Theory and the Black Lives Matter movement

The passage from the previous programme, "*Éthique et culture religieuse*", to that of "*Culture et citoyenneté québécoise*" is a logical and organic progression from our collective past, but its tenets must be understood and embraced by our future teachers. The secondary-level teacher is indeed a cultural ambassador and, decidedly, a cultural product. Our increasingly more complex socio-political times require, indeed, a more complex teacher identity, ready to take on the political and academic curveballs that society will throw at it.

Références

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