

November 3, 2016

Visit to Psychological Perspectives on Schooling; Psyc4464/Educ4464

Co-taught by Jill Hogan and Mahsa Ershadi

Observations of Ellen Winner

This class is a seminar in which students are considering a wide variety of educational theories and schools. They do not just read about these different approaches but instead interview people involved in each type of school over Skype, after reading papers on each approach and preparing questions.

Here is the course description which I find to be very interesting:

*In many countries, including the United States, children's attendance at school, or the documentation of a plan for learning outside of a school, is compulsory until late adolescence. As former or current students of schools, most people have opinions about what makes for good teaching and good learning and they use these opinions when making decisions about schooling for their children. Rather than encourage the acceptance of the educational status quo, or promote using one's personal anecdotes as the best evidence for making decisions about schooling, this course aims to use evidence from psychology concerning development and learning to examine the practices in some philosophically-driven approaches to schooling. Students will use this information to design schools in which the pedagogical approach, social milieu, and understandings of children's development are evidence-based and support articulated values and goals.*

When I got to class today, Jill was there, ready to go, with the computer already set up. She was clearly prepared. Students came in over the next few minutes. The class was about to do a Skype interview with the principal of KIPP Boston, a charter school which (as do all KIPP schools) focuses on academic achievement and strict codes of conduct. The class opened with Jill asking students to think about the wording of their questions to make sure they would not be misinterpreted. They took a few minutes to silently think about and edit their questions.

The next ten minutes were devoted to giving feedback to the two students who presented to the class the previous week. These students had interviewed Teach for America teachers and had videotaped their responses. Students all had comments to make about the presentation. Jill asked them to begin with praise, and then asked the students to pose questions to the presenters. Finally Jill asked the presenters whether there was anything they would have done differently, and she also asked them how they had intended the students to use the worksheet that they had passed out. These were good questions, fostering reflection about the quality of their presentation, as well as on their thoughts behind what they had done.

Next came a half hour interview with the principal of the KIPP school. Students took turns going to the computer, introducing themselves to the principal, and asking their question. The questions clearly showed that the students already knew a lot about this kind of school, and they were thus asking informed and intelligent questions. Almost every student asked a question. Students were clearly engaged and interested to hear both their peers' questions and the principal's response.

After the interview, there was a very lively discussion, with students taking very different positions about their opinions of the KIPP school philosophy. Some felt it was too harsh, while others felt it prepared disenfranchised students to cope in a harsh world. Jill did an excellent job of guiding the discussion, stepping in when things were moving a bit off track and bringing it back to the key questions.

I am impressed by the thinking behind how this class is organized. There are no lectures, no powerpoints summarizing the key philosophies of each school type. Students read papers, formulate questions, and interview practitioners. All students also lead one class and before they do so they must meet with Jill (or Mahsa) prior to the class. They discuss and argue among themselves, often bringing in their own personal experiences.

Students are assessed by their class participation and written work, including a wonderful final project in which they must design a school, based on educational and psychological evidence, and present their proposal to the class and to outside experts.

Overall assessment:

This course has been thought through extremely well. The course requires real thinking on the part of the students, not just memorization of facts. The students were highly engaged. This is a class where they will learn a lot and which they will not forget.