

# ED 125: Schooling in the U.S.

## Summer 2015 Course Syllabus<sup>1</sup>



**Class meetings:** Aug 3 – Sept 12  
Day / Time Mon-Tue-Thurs, 9:30 – 10:55 am  
Location ED 1207

**Instructor:** Joshua Kuntzman  
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Hours: TBD by appointment

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### Objectives, etc.

Our goal is to think and talk better than we already do about schooling in the U.S.; we want conversations in this class to be more careful, penetrating, insightful, and honest than they usually are. The way to achieve that goal is by exploring in depth each others' ideals and expectations, habitual attitudes and formative experiences, quick assumptions and slow questions. This may sound simple, but involves exercising many “muscles” of affective, moral, and rational perception that our commonsense allows to atrophy—which is not always easy. \*There is no expectation that we will arrive at final answers. In this class, good questions are better than answers.

We will read-watch-discuss examples of natural/school learning and accounts of U.S. schooling developments to enrich our understanding of “Democratic education” (the value-based idea; the factual practices) and of how we all came to “fit” into that complex cultural institution, its promises and its problems. In our effort to build better conversations about schooling, we will:

- identify the usual, commonsense formulations of educational “problems,” including the ideas and assumptions that underlie common hopes, plans, realities and complaints about schooling;
- examine historical and contemporary aims, functions, and processes of schooling in the U.S., especially as they relate to (a) the hopes of democracy and (b) the facts of difference;
- describe the processes, functions, and outcomes of schooling in the U.S., focusing on what learning happens in schools and where such learning takes us;
- become mindful of – and perhaps reshape – our common intellectual “habits,” those well-worn pathways of thinking, of reasoning, of imagining, and of acting.

The course is roughly divided into two “chunks” of questions and ideas. In the first, we'll focus on common features of the public schools we currently have, and historically/culturally situate our understanding of *how* we overwhelmingly ended up with those schools and not some other sort. In the second, we will strive to reformulate the problem of schooling with more deliberate attention to the

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<sup>1</sup> This ED 125 syllabus has been modified from Jason Raley's original syllabus for Winter 2013.

activity of learning, the ethical dilemmas of social government (who decides what for whom?) / economy (who gets what and how?) / commonwealth (what about the things we share?), and the challenges to conventional notions of ability and motivation.

The common chain that relates all the vast assumptions, theories, beliefs, plans, practices, and outcomes that we will be exposed to is this: educational aims (both genuinely and hypocritically) lead to learning encounters, to which students respond rationally as humans. Where learning outcomes do not match educational aims, the question arises, “Beyond what we intended, what are our students learning from us?” and, “Are there any better, more fitting and effective, ways to foster that learning?”

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## Course Materials

All **course readings** will be available for PDF download on the course Gauchospace site. These essays, research reports, stories, and other writing should provide material for thinking and talking about. Plan to keep running notes on/around these documents as you read.

(Please be sure you have an up-to-date version of Adobe Reader, available free online.)

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## Requirements

Every activity in this course is FUEL for thought. Do not think of these activities as end goals, but as transitory means to your thinking. Burn past them, grow beyond them. The work of this course is in expanding and developing your THINKING and helping to enrich the thinking experiences of others (which is to say, \*your questions, ideas, and experiences must be made VISIBLE to your fellow learners by some means – that is the work of this course). Show that you are moving:

**Involvement.** Of course, you must come to class. Prepared. Attendance is mandatory. Unavoidable absences such as serious illness, religious observances, etc. are understandable, but LET ME KNOW so I'm not worried about you, and contact peers for notes so you can keep up with discussions. Your involvement will be especially visible in your contributions to live and/or online discussions.

**Online discussions.** Each student must make at least **12 separate contributions** (or “posts”) to online discussions during the quarter. You will make these posts to forums on the course “Gauchospace” site, which will be available by the beginning of the second week of the quarter. There are three separate time periods for these contributions:

- **ROUND 1: 4 posts** between **Monday, 3 August** and **Saturday, 15 August**
- **ROUND 2: 4 posts** between **Monday, 17 August** and **Saturday, 29 August**
- **ROUND 3: 4 posts** between **Monday, 31 August** and **Saturday, 12 September**

Start early and spread your posts out! Online discussions, like real discussions, are most productive when individuals think, listen and respond in proportion. “Clustering” your responses and then dropping the mic is the online equivalent of filibustering and leaving the room. Don't shout and run away: log in for a conversation – long or short posts, your current ideas, claims, questions, challenges, or extensions – just get into it. Make at least the minimum number of posts during each of the three time periods (i.e., no “make ups” during the next time period). A contribution may be posted as either a “new discussion topic” or a “reply” to an existing topic. \*Make “new topic” titles clear: an idea, claim, or question (e.g., “democracy in the classroom is an unrealistic goal.”), not just a general

subject (e.g., “democracy in the classroom”). Give it some direction – not a perfect, final solution; just an intellectual or emotional question/idea that you want to develop. Connections to your personal experience are valuable here, but make those connections EXPLICIT.

**Exams.** There is some foundational (mostly informational) knowledge of the history of schooling in the U.S. that is important to prevent careless, arrogant thinking. You will take two exams (**Monday, 8/10 and Monday, 8/17**) to assess your understanding of basic facts and historical relationships. You must pass these exams to pass the class. You can arrange to re-take the exams if you fail to pass the first time they are offered.

**Interview #1:** “School and me.” Your aim with this interview is to unearth a rich, fully textured account of your interviewee’s experience in school. You should reach for both descriptions of actual scenes, with concrete sensory details about encounters with people and materials, as well as summative and evaluative statements of schooling. You will complete two “deliverables.”

(1) A written commentary. **DUE Mon, 10 August.** Your commentary will combine: (a) a detailed description of one or two important educational encounters *in school*, including their impact on the interviewee’s experience, (b) a more generalized description of the interviewee’s experience in school; and (c) two or more verbatim excerpts from the interview conversation that were especially interesting or illuminating.

(2) A performance. **DUE Thurs, 13 August.** You will perform a 15-30 second excerpt that invites your colleagues into the experience of the interviewee. You should not rely on a written script. You should memorize, and then enact (in voice and manner) the excerpted words of the interviewee.

**Interview #2:** How’d you (learn to) *do that*? **Report DUE Tues, 25 August.** Your task is to select and interview someone who does or makes something exceptionally well that you think is pretty great or interesting. Your aim is to get the fullest possible account of your interviewee’s “learning trajectory,” in and (especially) out of school. Among other things, this will include accounts of important educational encounters (positive and negative), sources of interest and growth, and sources and content of feedback. Your report will include: (a) a detailed description of one or two important educational encounters, including how they impacted the learning trajectory; (b) a generalized description of the circumstances that promoted learning.

**Gingerbread kid:** So you have a child – what do you want to sprinkle on them? **DUE Thurs, 27 August.** Everyone is born with their own special nature (their gifts, their interests, their difficulties – these we do not choose). The way that individual human is nurtured externally, however, can be just as formative (affecting, for example, what a child sees or is sheltered from, mimics or tests, associates with encouragement or with shame, understands as socially valuable or as undesirable, etc.). What do you want your child’s formative experiences (their education) to fill them with?

**“Dear teacher...”** Letter. **DUE Tues, 1 September.** John Dewey once wrote, “*What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon it destroys our democracy.*” The line is repeatedly cited, but what does it really mean? For this assignment, you will compose a letter to a teacher describing what you want for your own child (250-400 words). Since most students don’t have children, you may have to imagine a child. (Be sure to give your child a name!) In the letter, you will describe what you want the child to believe, to think and think about, to be able to do, say, or make. (Be concrete!) You should avoid what Dewey calls “glittering generalities,” things like “think critically” or “be kind.” Define for the teacher what those words mean in real, everyday life / classroom situations.

**School-In-A-Box.** Over the second half of the course, you will work in a small group to design a school from scratch, incorporating responses to the course material. There will be many discussions and small tasks to complete. The details of this assignment will be provided later in the course. The following list includes a rough idea of the “deliverables” for School-in-a-Box:

(6) Part 1: A preliminary list. **DUE Tues, 4 August.** In the first part of this assignment, each student will prepare a ranked list of 10 items s/he thinks ought to be included in a “school-in-a-box” that could be transported, as needed, to any location in the U.S. to start a school from scratch. The list must also include a short (2-3 sentence) argument for each item. Bring a hard copy to lecture.

(7) Part 2: Argument. **DUE Thurs, 6 August.** In the second part of this assignment, you will make three contributions to arguments for (or against) specific items that could go into a “school-in-a-box.” Each proposed “school-in-a-box” item will have its own discussion in the GachoSpace forum (Yes, this means 3 additional posts to GachoSpace, and no, they do not count toward the total required posts.)

(8) Part 3: Site/Building plan. **DUE Tues, 18 August.** Your group will produce a plan for a site or building. If your building is stationary, you will need to include a map of the building’s (ideal) location. If you are working out a mobile site (e.g., a “trailer” school), then you will need to describe plans for transport and set up, as well as several possible temporary locations.

(9) Part 4: A day in the life... **DUE Mon, 31 August.** Your group will produce a detailed description of an imagined day in the life of your school. You will be able to choose a point-of-view (or multiple points-of-view) that affords a clear perspective into the principles and practices that will characterize your school.

(10) School Design Forum. **DUE Thurs, 3 September.** The whole class will participate in an open forum in which small groups will present the best or “signature” ideas from their school design. Each group will also share a complete set of principles (a kind of “mission statement”) that distinguish the school. The forum will aim toward identifying the “best” ideas to be compiled into a single, comprehensive design plan for a school that will seek “crowd” or venture funding within one year.

**A few things to remember...**

\*Write your name on any written work.

\*Keep hard copies of all work, including your contributions to online discussions. A portfolio of work can help you to evaluate your progress in the course, and document your achievements in case of misunderstandings, technological mishaps, etc. when we discuss grades...

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## Grading

There are a few basic things that you really need to know to have any kind of intelligent handle on schooling in the U.S. Most of these are historical. None of them require any creativity. It’s just stuff you should know and understand. You either get it or you don’t. With that in mind, there are two exams in the first half of the course that are designed to assess your knowledge and understanding. You will receive either a “pass” or “fail.” You cannot pass the course if you fail these exams. You can retake the exams until you pass them.

That said, the vast bulk of this course is designed to give you the tools and opportunities to practice better thinking about schooling. And I am responsible for assigning you a letter-grade (A-B-C-D-F) that evaluates the quality of your thinking. The trouble is, “good thinking” is impossible to assess in any objective, quantitative way without also seeming to cheapen the teaching and learning process. So,

I will give you a grade evaluating your *visible* involvement and commitment to the *practices* that promote and support excellent thinking and learning (e.g., your presence: it is impossible to get an A if you are absent or late to more than 3 meetings). Grades say 'From what I can see, you are here':

**A** ~ Exceptionally involved and committed to exploring others' thinking and using the ideas of others to further one's own thinking. Asks many questions, finds and pursues lines of inquiry, looks for new problems, looks for subtle points and differences of opinion. Seeks to move others' thinking; is willing to be moved. Regularly contributes to conversations.

**B** ~ Good stuff, but not quite an "A."

**C** ~ Just meets requirements for participation. Completes all assignments, but without much visible commitment to "movement" and the conversations/interactions this entails.

**D/F** ~ Unsatisfactory

These grades are a conversation. You will receive two letter grades during the term, one midway, one quite close to the end; they will not be averaged—you could, for example, get a C at mid-term and then earn an A at the end. **If you find yourself objecting to your grade, we will discuss any and all objections, openly in class or one-on-one.** Your grades will be careful, fair, collaborative assessments of your involvement and commitment to good thinking and learning *practices* over the quarter. \*Yes, you will be able to argue your grade. Yes, your grade could change.

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## Preliminary Course Schedule

**Week 1** (3 – 6 August) The schools we have ... History Pt 1: American values

Readings: Mann (1848), Becker (1972), Pratt (1883)  
Assignment: School-in-a-Box Pt.1, Pt. 2

**Week 2** (10 – 13 August) History Pt 2: progress and accountability

Readings: Angus (1988), Bell (1956), Gardner et al. (1983)  
Assignment: Interview 1, Performance, Exam 1

**Week 3** (17 – 20 August) What "science" makes clear ... observation muddies

Readings: Gould (1996) and Kamin (1974), Henry (1963), Nicholls/Hazzard (1993 - "Concerns ...")  
Assignment: Exam 2, School-in-a-Box Pt.3

**Week 4** (24 – 27 August) Learning

Readings: Mehan (1979), Gee (2005), Ball (1993), Tyack & Tobin (1994) "The 'grammar' of schooling"  
Assignment: Interview 2, Gingerbread Kid

**Week 5** (31 August – 3 September) Meritocracy{.} vs. Democracy{?}

Readings: Young (1994 – revisited; 1958 – ch.3) & Gladwell (2011), Woodruff (2005), Dewey (1938)  
Assignment: "Dear Teacher..." Letter, School-in-a-Box Pt. 4, Pt. 5 (forum)

**Week 6** (7 – 10 September) What Now?

Readings: Hardin (1968) and Wells (1904), McDermott/Varenne (1999) and Kohl (1991)  
Assignments: Final – Position & Reflection (TBD)

\*Readings and assignments are subject to change.