

ED 125: Schooling in the U.S.

Summer 2016 Course Syllabus¹



Class meetings: June 20 – July 30
Day / Time Mon-Wed-Fri, 12:15pm – 1:35pm
Location ED 1213

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Hours: TBD by appointment

Objectives, etc.

Our goal in this course is to (1) exercise our sense of what “good learning” means for us, as individuals and as members in a common society, and through this work, (2) improve the way we think, talk, and make decisions about schooling in the U.S. Our culture and our commonsense make certain conventions and beliefs seem natural or inevitable, accurate or unquestionable, so exercising our “muscles” for perceiving education (in its fuller reality) requires *practice*, in *the company of others*—with all the emotional, rational, moral challenges and supports this invites: this class is a group effort.

We will read, watch, and discuss real-world examples of learning, American notions about education, and historical accounts of U.S. schooling developments to enrich our understanding of how we all came to “fit” into that complex cultural institution, with all its legitimate promise (as a values-rich ideal) and its evolving problems (as a practical reality).

In our effort to build better conversations about schooling, we will:

- Explore, complicate, and expand the central ideas (often unspoken) that underlie our most common hopes, plans, and complaints about schooling—and
- Observe the stories we tell ourselves about schooling, the ways we formulate educational “problems,” and the means we turn to for “solving” these problems (based on those ideas);
- Describe the diverse 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 perceiving, of reasoning, of imagining, and of acting.

How will we know if we’re getting it wrong? If you are apathetic, or you leave the course feeling the same anger—or happiness, doubt, hope etc.—about the same things you were at the beginning. How will we know if we’re getting it right? If you find yourself asking more questions than you did before you took the course, or you are able to identify and assess the assumptions underlying those common educational situations and commonsense problems that you encounter.

¹ This ED 125 syllabus has been modified from Jason Raley's original syllabus for Winter 2016.

You should leave with the tools, will, and interest to challenge your own thinking and that of your fellow citizens and neighbors. We will have succeeded, then, if you have a desire – and the capacities – to start and sustain a more “intelligent” conversation about schooling in the U.S. In short, we want you *moving*.

Course Organization

The course is roughly divided into six themes: **School, Person, Learning, Democracy, Difference, and The Real World**. We will devote at one week to each theme. Over the course of those lectures and conversations, we will examine both historical and contemporary approaches to the theme, consider new ideas that might modify our approach, and work out together what that implies for schooling.

This course is designed so that its pace, direction, content, and procedures can change in response to students’ experience with it. The course is structured, but its intended structure is more like an open gym (with boundaries, rules, resources, and plans are meant to encourage and support revisions and improvisations) than a pre-railed train track. This kind of structure can be unnerving for some, but it is a better fit for the particular goals of this course. Its success depends upon students’ involvement in activities and assignments, as well as honest and regular communication among you, your peers, and myself.

Course Materials

All **course readings** will be available for download on the course Gauchospace site. These essays, research reports, stories, and other writing should provide material for thinking and talking about. They are not there to be passively consumed—please “graffiti” them liberally, until they are clearly yours. You should plan to download and print these readings (so that you can write on them), or annotate your electronic copies, or keep running notes as you read.

Additional readings and references will be posted online from time to time, especially as a “follow-up” after course lectures. Although strongly recommended, students are not required to review these materials.

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

Requirements

All activities in this course are FUEL for your thinking. Burn past them, grow beyond them. Expanding and developing your understandings, and helping to enrich the thinking experiences of others, is the work of this course—which is to say, *make your questions, ideas, and experiences VISIBLE to your fellow learners, and to myself, by some means. Show that you are moving:

- **Involvement.** Of course, you must come to class. Prepared. Attendance is mandatory. Be on time. Don’t leave early. Unavoidable absences 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.

(Do the readings! Do the assignments!) Your attendance and preparation will make possible a meaningful *involvement* in the course. Sometimes this involvement will mean talking out loud. Just as often, it will mean listening to and considering what others are thinking.

- **Reading.** You are required to read all course texts. We also expect you to annotate (“graffiti”) as you read: make notes, posing questions in the margins. These will not be collected—but You will turn in one quote from every reading, and your reason for finding that quote valuable or memorable—and reading actively will make this an easy task. (Quotes may be hand-written or typed, and are to be brought to class the day that readings are due.)
- **Online discussions.** Each student must make at least **3 separate posts** to online discussions each week between **Monday, June 20** and **Wednesday, July 27**. You will make these posts to discussion forums on the course “GachoSpace” site. Here are a few guidelines:
 - Some of your posts will be “after thoughts” following a whole group or section discussion. Some will raise questions about or extend ideas from course readings. Many will be direct responses to your colleagues’ GachoSpace posts and ongoing discussions. Follow your genuine flow of interests, worries, ideas, and questions.
 - (A post may be a “reply” to an existing topic, or a new topic. If someone else has already started a discussion that connects to your topic, you should join that discussion rather than start a new one.)
 - Your posts do not need to sound “formal” or “academic.” Essays and tests ask you to be sure; these discussions often begin with a question or idea you are not at all sure about, either intellectually or emotionally. Connections to your personal experience can be valuable here, as long as the connections are made explicit and as long as you don’t limit your posts to autobiographical accounts.
 - If your post is a new topic, your “Title” should be a full claim, or question (e.g., “Democracy in the classroom is an unrealistic goal.”) Avoid titles that describe a topic in general terms (e.g., “Democracy in the classroom”).
 - (Each individual post should contain its own ideas, claims, questions, challenges, or extensions. That is, a post should do more than simply summarize or assess someone else’s position.)
 - (If you do pose a question, present your own possible answers.)
 - Each post should be long enough to give your colleagues something to really think about, but short enough to invite replies. (The “sweet spot” is usually between 150 and 250 words.)
- **In-class writing.** You will often have short in-class writing assignments during group meetings. This writing will give you the chance to gather and organize your own thinking and identify ideas and questions that deserve more consideration. *Note: You must provide your own loose-leaf, 8.5x11 paper for this work.*
- **Exams.** There is some foundational (mostly informational) knowledge and some basic tools for thinking that are essential to your involvement in the course. We will assess your grasp of these tools and information with occasional short exams. 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: “How’d you (learn to) do that?” Report DUE Wednesday, June 29.** 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 path toward expertise, with special focus on out-of-school learning. 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 events in your interviewee’s experience, including how they impacted your interviewee’s decisions, beliefs, and/or actions; (b) an analysis and description of the circumstances that promoted learning.

- **Interview #2: “School and me.” Report DUE Monday, July 11.** 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. Your report will include: (a) a generalized description of the interviewee’s experience in school; (b) a detailed description of one or two important educational encounters in school, including their impact on the interviewee’s experience; and (c) two or more verbatim excerpts that were especially interesting or illuminating.
- **Performance.** On **Wednesday, July 13**, you will perform a 15-30 second excerpt from one of the two interviews that invites your colleagues into the experience of the interviewee. You may either memorize the excerpt or rely on a written script. In any case, you will not summarize or describe the interviewee’s experience, but will enact (in voice and manner) the spoken words of the interviewee.
- **A “Write-Around.”** In place of a final exam, on **Friday, July 29**, we will spend our last group meeting responding in writing, in real time, to each other’s writing. Each student will need to bring a piece of original writing to begin this session. The content and format of these “write-around starters” will be decided in section.
- **“Pop up” assignments. Dates TBD.** In addition to course readings and online posts, we will occasionally ask you to complete a small assignment outside of class meetings. These assignments will extend or anticipate topics, will have short timelines, and are impossible to know for sure in advance. Because of the unplanned nature of such work, we will try to keep the assignments around 20-30 minutes. Ones that will likely pop up include:
 - **Gingerbread kid:** So you have a child – what do you want to sprinkle on them? Every child is unique, and you can't predict or choose their nature (their gifts, their interests, their difficulties). But you do have a say in how that person is nurtured, externally. What do you want your child's formative experiences (their education) to look and sound like, and to fill them with?
 - **School-In-A-Box.** What if you could start a school from scratch? Here are some in-roads for translating your educational ideals into practical realities: (1) Items and arguments – what tools (furniture, writing implements, etc.) does a school need to “do” education effectively? Why those things, and how should they be used? (2) Site/Building plan – What resources and structures does a school need to support “good” learning? Where should it be situated relative to the community or to sites of learning? (3) A day in the life – describe an imagined day in the life of your school, from whatever point-of-view (or multiple points-of-view) affords a clear perspective into the principles and practices that characterize your school.

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. 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 will be a few short exams designed to assess your knowledge and understanding. You will either “pass” or “fail” these tests. You cannot pass the course if you fail any one of the tests. You can retake any tests 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 that means 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., being present (it is impossible to get an A if you are absent or late to more than 3 meetings) and doing assignments (it is impossible to get an A if you are not keeping up with readings, weekly posts, etc.).

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 ~ Better than the minimum without being truly excellent. Goes beyond basic requirements, but inconsistently or incompletely. May identify ideas and questions for further inquiry without following up. May present one's own point-of-view without a full consideration of others' thinking.

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

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 (provided you are present and doing all assignments). **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.

Preliminary Course Schedule

Week 1 (20 – 24 June) School

Readings: Mann (1848), Khan (2012); Becker (1972), Gardner (1983), Gladwell (2011)

Week 2 (27 June – 1 July) The Person

Readings: Wells (1904); Dewey (1902); Bell (1956)

Assignment: Interview 1, Exam 1

Week 3 (4 – 8 July) Learning

Readings: Hawkins (1965); Henry (1963), Nicholls/Hazzard (1993-competence); Ball (1993)

Assignment: Exam 2, Gingerbread Kid

Week 4 (11 – 15 July) Democracy

Readings: Woodruff (2005); Dewey (1938); Gee (2005)

Assignment: Interview 2, Performance

Week 5 (18 – 22 July) Diversity

Readings: Pratt (1883); Gould (1993), Kohl (1991); Tyack & Tobin (1994)

Week 6 (25- 29 July) The Real World

Readings: McDermott/Varenne (1999); Takano (2013)

**Readings and assignments are subject to change.*