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explorations in education

Cities, Youth, and Technology
Toward a Pedagogy of Autonomy

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Toward a Pedagogy of Autonomy

- ¶1:22 Tonight I want to start with a few contextual remarks and then put four questions, reflecting in a rather preliminary way on possible answers to each. Between the third and fourth question, I will show a brief video clip in order to concretize some of my thoughts.
- ¶2:22 Through this wonderful symposium, we have been discussing the future of youth for two days. It is valuable to remember that the future is not something that people know. The future does not exist, here and now. It is not determinate. The future is something that people are making. It is in progress. Many people are making the future of youth, people who are younger in collaboration with those who are older. In conservative times, in making the future the younger assimilate to established ways, reincarnating the choices and preferences of those who are older. People create historical turning points, in contrast, as the younger and the older together make something new, perhaps more desirable, as a set of possibilities that the young can fulfill. Let us aim at that, at making a future of youth that more fully fulfills aspirations of public worth.
- ¶3:22 To depart from the given, to avoid recapitulating the limitations of the present, it helps to break through presumptive necessities, to perceive alternative possibilities. Let us question apparent realities and open our sense of possibility in a long-term frame of mind. The young – short on history and long on life – are the natural bearers of long-term change. I want to pose four questions, and to toy with answers, mindful that the long term frees us from respecting the obvious. The young will be old in fifty years, and the future that people cannot make in the next five years, they may well make over the next fifty. So let us start.

Query One: Where does youth reside?

- ¶4:22 Consider for a moment how we make maps, those schemas with which we hold in mind the human habitat. Think of a map of Europe, or North America, or the globe in school or study. A great peculiarity is the way we imagine vast areas illuminated by noonday sunlight, shining directly down from above, with a light that is even all around the world. Usually that light, illuminating the land with a constant intensity, has an even greater peculiarity: it shines with a different tint here and there, giving Austria a bluish hue, Germany a golden color, France a shade of red, and so on, dividing the land into contiguous areas. Such a light heightens consciousness of diverse borders and makes us organize human life according to the way those borders group people within and set them apart from those without. Once we established a grouping, we count and observe; we compare and contrast; we analyze all manner of statistics and extrinsic characteristics. Such constructions deeply characterize the way people around the world describe, orient, and

understand themselves. A different kind of map, however, might show quite different relationships.

¶5:22 Imagine instead a map drawn, not under a constant daylight, but one that shows the earth as if it is two or three hours after sundown all around the globe. Let there be some moonlight everywhere so that large bodies of water will shimmer slightly, differentiating themselves from the dark landmass. This dark landmass, however, will not be a uniform black. All across it, patches of light will shine upwards into the night sky. Some quite large, others small, these areas will define the darkened land with the night-lights of city life. These lights will not come down on the earth from outside, but rise up from it, the illumination generated by concentrations of human activity. This map of the earth beneath the night sky shows urban areas spreading across the land, here and there, all about the globe. Now map the major roads, railways, shipping and air routes in a glowing red, representing the energy that drives human movement across the lanes of transport. These lines will join the light of the urban areas, linking them into an irregular web that envelops the earth in a representation of human interaction.

¶6:22 Youth resides within this web. The young, along with the rest of us, live in “the city,” a great, interconnected network of activity. We do so overwhelmingly in the developed world, increasingly in the developing. In living in the city, it is not that one lives simply in this city or that city – Vienna or New York or one of hundreds of others. People now, especially the young, live in the linked web of all these cities, traveling easily from one place to another, moving, picking up styles and mores and opportunities from this spot or the other, melding it all into a cosmopolitan mix of urban options. One can fly easily from Vienna to New York, and drive to Albany or Toronto, or go quickly to any of a vast array of places around the world, but in doing so, one will be going from one district of the city to another, and it will be only with difficulty that one leaves the city all together.

¶7:22 People may make the future of 21st-century youth as urbanists, in the sense that they made the future of 19th-century youth as nationalists.

Query Two: What is the original interactive medium, the first and oldest of the new media?

¶8:22 New media – digital, electronic, seemingly so unprecedented – cloud our sense of continuity. New media are so interactive, so responsive to the user’s choice, so expressive. The World Wide Web provides a vast array of addresses – Universal Resource Locators – each of which represents a place in cyberspace with which one might interact. The Web supports the user’s choice. As the slogan asks – “Where do you want to go today?” Yet such interactivity has a long and wonderful history. The city is the original, the first, archetypical medium of interaction. The new media are simply an extension, a completion, of the city as the locus of interactive life.

¶9:22 In the village, each person has a place; in the city each has instead an address, an address that permits options, random access, choice. One goes down the country road in linear fashion; the city presents a network of intersecting streets, multiple floors to each building, corridors with many different doorways, and milling concentrations of people in public space. The bandwidth of the city is immense – three dimensional, responsive to eye and ear, to touch, to taste, to smell, even to kinetic feel, here crowded and oppressed, there astonishing, extroverted, exhilarating. The city is an operating system that handles immense flows of complex interaction, often with cascades of congestion, but with tremendous resilience and capacity for error correction.

¶10:22 As the oldest of the new media, the city is the place where people form and exercise their powers of choice. “Stadt Luft macht frei.” Youth, coming of age within the city, has this task of forming distinctive powers of choice, building chosen skills and preferences, making a place within the great mélange of human achievement. The city concentrates together human possibilities. The young must choose and master, exercise their elective affinities. In this process, they strive to achieve a persona, a recognizable presence accorded to them by a community of peers. In the city, people shed ascribed characteristics, striving instead to take on acquired, achieved ones. This striving to exercise choice, and through it to define communities of distinctive interests, is the essence of both the city and the new media, which so extend the city. Compare the map, which we drew above, showing the web of cities and transportation routes enveloping the nighttime globe, to a nighttime map aggregating the loops of interaction on the World Wide Web – the two maps are one and the same, the map of people, interacting with one another in the complex construction of action, meaning, and value.

Query Three: What then is new in the digital new media?

¶11:22 If the new media are as old as the city, for practical purposes coextensive with the construction of human civilization, what leads us to call the new media new? Here we must recognize that the new media extend, universalize, and deeply democratize the potentials for choice, for free achievement, that the city represents in human culture.

¶12:22 In the past, the city, and all its attendant resources for the support of meaningful choice, has been naturally, inherently elitist in the potentialities it offers people. Before digital technologies, the city was an interactive medium, full of choices – restricted choices, choices that were restricted, sometimes by invidious intent, and sometimes of necessity, for the carrying capacity was often highly limited. The new media overcome these limitations. The new media make the city naturally egalitarian, not elitist.

¶13:22 With the new media, any person at any place and any time can use cultural resources that in the past only a select few could use. Before digital technologies, regardless of nominal ideology, those who built and managed collections of books or art, or impresarios of skilled performances, or the

makers of very expensive, powerful and dangerous research instruments, had no choice but to limit and control access. To do otherwise would have destroyed the resources through indiscriminate use and subjected novice users sometimes to inordinate risk. The material constraints of the system imposed stringent exclusions on its participation and use. Now, the new media change the constraints of access and participation fundamentally. With the infrastructure in place, all can have digital access as each might wish without damage to self or system. And the access is not simply passive, but interactive, enabling each to participate at will in public communication, to criticize and celebrate achievements as they see fit. The new media open participation in public communication extensively by lowering the capital costs required to send complex messages to select individuals or to large numbers of recipients. Participation may remain low, but it ceases to be constrained.

¶14:22 Many other developments in the history of culture and communication have initiated the process of democratization that the new media complete. Printing, modern transportation, mechanized farming, mass production of goods and services, and above all mass communications have made the tremendous growth of cities feasible and substantially broadened participation in cultural life. But the range of choice afforded to most people, while significant, remained restricted. For instance, under the aegis of mass communication, audiences became potentially universal, but the power to originate communication remained highly restricted. The great student of mass media, Marshall McLuhan, aptly called the result “the global village,” for essentially, whenever people were collectively alert, the same message pressed onto everyone everywhere. The new media are in stark contrast to the mass media. Highly interactive and egalitarian in access, new media make it possible to turn the global village into the global city. Here, to a degree never before approximated, each person will have the opportunity to craft, with the full resources of the culture, the persona of his or her choice and to express it publicly, interacting with others in a constructed community of meaning.

¶15:22 Let us pause here to concretize the main points: youth dwells in the city; the city is the original interactive medium, requiring people to live by making conscious choices; and the new media democratize urban life, opening full opportunities for self-definition and self-expression to all.

Video Clip: Report on the New York City after school group, HarlemLive.

Play a three and a half minute clip on HarlemLive from ABC Children First, “The Technology Connection,” July 21, 2000. Readers can access the work of HarlemLive at www.harlemlive.org.

¶16:22 Here we see youth living very much in the city, in the inner city, treating it as a place of meaningful interaction, using the new media as a highly accessible means to communicate to the world their love and fascination for their city, for the meaning it has for its residents, and for the values it contributes to the

sum of human culture. Here youth is making its future, a future of which it is proud.

Query Four: Can the city exemplify excellence in educational principle and practice?

¶17:22 Youth dwells in the city. But for the most part, our tradition holds the city deeply suspect as an educator. There is a certain angst associated with our very topic, the future of youth, which may itself emanate from this suspicion of the city as educator, so deeply engrained in our tradition.

¶18:22 This angst, that youth in the city will inevitably go astray, goes back to the very beginning of our culture, for the story of the Fall is basically the story of human expulsion from its rural paradise into an urban realm of sinful sophistication. Variations on the theme, on the weakness of the city as educator, pervade ideas about education. Taken at its most literal level, the *polis* that Plato envisioned in the *Republic* was not the *polis* of Periclean Athens, which he dismissed as the city of pigs, but a city simplified to the point that it became little more than a village, and the idea of justice that Plato advanced – keeping to one’s proper business – was close to taking as paradigmatic of human virtue that village condition in which each person was born into a place and station, acceptance and fulfillment of which made for a harmonious locale. Rousseau’s animosity against the city was fundamental to his thought and clearly central to the educational theories advanced in *Emile*. Pestalozzi celebrated the potential of the village as educator, and Froebel the garden, the place that harkens back to paradise, suited to the innocence of childhood. As a result, around the world, people celebrate the value of the Kindergarten, not the Kinderstadt. In the United States, nostalgia for the one-room schoolhouse typifies a mindless bias towards rural education, despite telling satires in works such as Twain’s *Tom Sawyer*. The 50’s film, *The Blackboard Jungle*, set the stereotype of the inner-city school where the classroom pulses with hostility and ignorance, a cultural stereotype that has since reverberated through countless repetitions. Abysmal expectations about the city as a locale for excellent education have motivated the 20th-century sprawl of the suburbs, so destructive to the environment and so wasteful of human energies. To make the future of youth, let us change these abysmal expectations; let us transcend the angst.

¶19:22 Educators of youth need to transform prevailing expectations about the city as educator. Expectations are low, not simply because the tradition holds the city suspect. Educational experience has left most adults skeptical about the urban possibilities. Their reasoning, usually tacit, is nonetheless inexorable. Modern education has been an urban movement. Universal, compulsory schooling would not have been feasible had populations not become highly urbanized. The great drive towards the democratization of educational opportunity in the nineteenth century and on was largely an urban drive, the need for universal literacy being a need experienced most intensely in urban life, under conditions of industrialism and bureaucratic management. Without

school buses, contemporary educational expectations could not have been extended to genuinely rural areas. In the upwelling of educational effort over the past one hundred fifty years, a utilitarian pedagogy of bureaucratic schooling has been dominant. A modest, standardized curriculum, enforced by periodic testing, has proven most practicable, consistent, and realistic, given the means of communication and the quality of staffing attainable. Few adults, having experienced the bureaucratic school found this mode of schooling exhilarating, engaging, liberating. It was a grind, not a spontaneous fulfillment. It worked, more or less, for those favored by fortune and family; for many others it failed, clearly so when expectations went beyond a minimal, functional literacy. Far too many adults have experienced urban schooling as a deadening formal resource in the midst of a corrupting environment of informal education.

¶20:22 Recoiling recurrently from this experience, urban reformers sought to create progressive schools, engaging youth through a student-centered inquiry based pedagogy. Recurrently in the 20th century, such reforms proved unworkable, outside of heroic, exceptional cases, serving no one well. The reason for the unworkability was fundamental – with limited resources, only extraordinary teachers could make progressive principles work. Having to rely on a few textbooks, perhaps a very modest school library, and an isolated teacher, a group of inquiring students could not take any line of inquiry very wide or deep. Under such conditions, inquiry-based learning would lead inexorably to confusion and superficiality. Practice would therefore revert toward didactic rigor, a systematic curriculum imparted with authority by the teacher, enforced by frequent recitations and periodic portentous tests. Progressive reform recurrently failed. Schools reverted to the bureaucratic norm. Workable schools might bore the young and leave may behind, whom, alas, the surrounding city would all-too-often seduce with a panoply of corrupting influences.

¶21:22 With the new media, in school and outside of it, we are putting very powerful tools of inquiry and communication into the hands of students. This action may change significantly the educational ecology prevailing within the city. Reforms, which did not work under prior conditions, may now flourish under emerging conditions. The limitations that undercut the progressive solution to the educational weakness of city life may be quickly overcome. The new media transfer a great deal of educational control to the student. The new media amplify the power of communication and interaction that each young person can employ. A pedagogy of open-ended inquiry, which once would inexorably end in frustration and mystification, can now dependably lead to a deep, expansive engagement with powerful ideas and concepts. The exercise of choice, so characteristic of urban life throughout all ages, becomes the driving means of educational work in a well-wired classroom. The power to communicate ideas and accomplishments, essential in the urban effort to create a persona, becomes feasible for anyone who has learned to use the Internet as a locus of self-expression.

¶22:22

The city, extended and universalized with new media, may become the locus where all persons at all places and all times can pursue an intellectually rigorous progressive education. When that happens, the city as educator will be perfected and complete.