CHAPTER 4

THE CULTURE OF SCHOOL AND HOW IT SHAPES LITERACY LEARNING

In considering the consequences of education on human development, Cole (2005) takes a cross-cultural and historical perspective that leads him back to the earliest classrooms of Indo-European civilization. He notes the historical depth of educational traditions, inferring great stability based on the arrangement of a Sumerian classroom in the ancient city of Mari, Syria. This classroom likely originated in the city’s second golden age under the Amorite dynasty that lasted from roughly 1,900 BCE through 1759 BCE, when the city was sacked by Hammurabi, sixth king of Babylon. Students occupied its seats 1,400 years before Nebuchadnezzar II is believed to have built the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

Cole surmises that the last four millennia have seen great continuity in educational practice in a number of regards. As the photograph reveals, students sat in rows—here, literally fixed in stone—facing the teacher. This arrangement, in spite of other developments in teaching practice, has served to guide instruction in most Western educational settings from the Sumerian civilization of antiquity through the present. It is as old as the idea of formal teaching and learning in the history of human social life.

Other ways of teaching and learning have been developed over the millennia. Over 1,500 years after students sat through their teacher’s Sumerian lectures, Socrates taught by means of cross-examining and typically refuting his students’ assumptions, revealing their inadequate reasoning through the dialogues that he manipulated. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi formulated educational visions that centered on the learner. Rousseau pioneered the Romantic conception of the (male) child as learner and the adult as guide and companion in educational experiences rather than director and authority, an idea that has endured in many forms in Western education, if largely on the margins. Educators from Montessori to Dewey have continued to outline child-centered approaches that have remained on the fringe of conventional schooling, recommending alternative possibilities to the teacher-and-text-centered pedagogies that have ruled Western (and Asian) educational practice for millennia yet not in so convincing a way as to displace the established norm.

Indeed, these alternative approaches have been reviled by political conservatives because of their investment of authority in newly-emerging understandings rather than historical and traditional values, practices, and knowledge. Dewey’s (1916)
Democracy and Education was recently named one of “the Ten Most Harmful Books of the 19th and 20th Centuries” by the politically and socially conservative organization Human Events (2005), ranking fifth after Marx and Engels’ (1848) The Communist Manifesto, Hitler’s 1925-1926 Mein Kampf, Mao Zedong’s (1966) Quotations from Chairman Mao, and Kinsey’s (1948, 1953) The Kinsey Report. Based on this ranking, progressive, student-centered instruction designed to promote democratic social processes and the discovery of new knowledge is considered almost as frightening a prospect as communism, fascism, and sex. It is considered an even greater threat to conservative sensibilities than the books ranked behind it: Marx’s (1867-1894) Das Kapital, Friedan’s (1963) The Feminine Mystique, Compte’s (1830-1842) The Course of Positive Philosophy, Nietzsche’s (1886) Beyond Good and Evil, and Keynes (1936) General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money, making Dewey a greater menace to conservatives than are critiques of capitalism, the National Organization for Women, more sex, atheism, and a trust in government as an agent for social progress.

Although a favorite of U. S. professors of education, Dewey and his progressive agenda (not to mention Marx and his advocacy for the proletariat) appear to have little presence in U. S. schools. In his history of English education, Applebee (1974) notes that a number of pedagogical traditions are available to teachers, most of which derive from the template set by ancient Mesopotamian classroom spaces (cf. Cuban, 1993). While the students’ seats are no longer made of stone and only rarely remain bolted to the floor, they typically stay fixed in one location, facing forward so that students may concentrate on the teacher undistracted by their classmates and whatever they might have to say. The image presented in Figure 1 of my Aunt Alice’s elementary school classroom in Brooklyn in around 1920 shares similarities with both the Sumerian classroom described by Cole (2005) and the UC-San Diego classroom at the Congress of the International Society for Cultural and Activity Research (ISCAR) at which I presented a version of this chapter (Smagorinsky, 2008c), in which the chairs were indeed bolted to the floor.

Dewey’s (1902) progressive views emphasize engaged citizenship that respects diversity of individuality and cultivates critical, socially engaged intelligence that produces democratic classrooms based in learner-centered, constructivist learning that proceeds from joint activity (John Dewey Project on Progressive Education, 2002). Such student-centered, collaborative, activity-oriented, inquiry-driven, and socially-mediated methods have had many incarnations over the years. From the schools founded by Italians Maria Montessori in Rome and Loris Malaguzzi in Reggio Emilio, to Kilpatrick’s (1918) project method, to the arts-oriented educational initiatives emerging from Harvard University’s Project Zero, to notions of authentic assessment (Wiggins, 1993), to other student-driven curricula throughout the world, educators have attempted to chip away at the edifice of authoritarian schooling for many years, creating alternatives to placing students in passive, receptive, mimetic, and stationary roles. In spite of the possibilities they have demonstrated, these approaches have largely been either the province of specialized