

Traveling Through Cities—Thinking About Schools

Cities provide an ideal context for developing critical thinking. Schools should exploit urban resources to relate students' learning experiences to their everyday lives.



Photos from left to right: Place de la Concorde, Paris, France; Primary School, Wellington, New Zealand; Central Station, Stockholm, Sweden. Photo credits: French Cultural Services, New Zealand Publicity Studios, and American Swedish News Exchange. We extend our thanks to the French, New Zealand, and Swedish Embassies, Washington, D.C., for their cooperation.

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In the past year we have traveled to over 16 cities in nine countries. In some of those cities we met with educators. In other cities we only rode the buses and subways, sat in cafes, toured shopping districts, visited museums and galleries, attended local celebrations, walked through residential and industrial sections, and generally spent time talking with people who happened across our path.

The workings of a familiar city seem to be taken for granted and are largely invisible. One tends to move through familiar surroundings following accustomed patterns more or less unconsciously. As visitors to foreign cities, however, we were forced again and again to consciously figure out what we wanted and how to get it. The world of our travels was filled with problems to

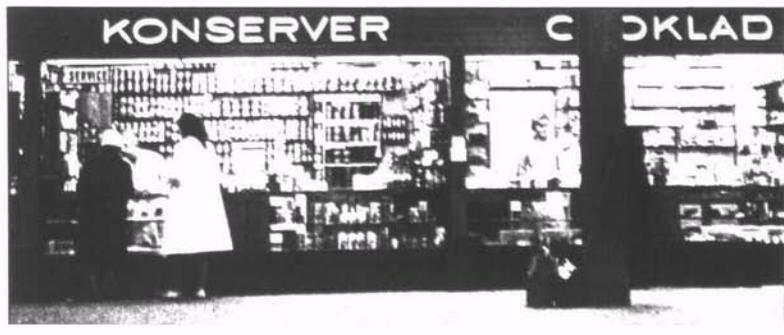
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be solved. Where can we buy food, where do the buses run, where is an inexpensive place to sleep, where is the post office, what is possible to do in this city, how do we find out, who can we ask? Again and again, because we were outsiders, we were required to ask, in a variety of ways and in reference to any number of subjects, "How does it work?" and "Why does it work *that* way?" Perhaps it was this questioning that helped us see both the similarities in the nature and impact of industrial technologies and the differences in the way cultures mediated those technologies.

Technology and Culture: Notes on Similarities and Differences

It did not take long to discover that we liked some cities better than others. This was no doubt true because of our own idiosyncrasies and cultural values, and because there are tangible differences and similarities among cities.

We saw plenty of objective similarities that ignored national boundaries. For the most part what was similar were the artifacts of shared technologies and the patterns of behavior those technologies support. Our knowledge of technology smoothed the way in every country we visited. Thus, although we speak no



French, we had no difficulty identifying and making use of gas stations, buses, trains, restaurants, telephones, and radios in France. We do "speak" the appropriate technology.

We also found that cultures mediate technologies in a variety of ways that reveal different assumptions about the world and what is important. For example, we had spent a lot of time in crowded subway stations in many cities during our travels, but as we stood in the subway station in Stockholm we both felt something was amiss. We were surrounded by people of all ages who were moving along in various directions at a quick pace. We asked ourselves, "What seems so strange?" Finally, we figured it out. It was quiet. People were moving quickly, presumably talking with one another, but conducting themselves in such a way that even in a small, crowded place, there were no sounds that hurrying crowds usually make. The technology that helped create the subway station in Stockholm is the same as in London and Paris, but the experience of being in a subway station in Stockholm was very different from that in any other city we had visited.

It was this kind of experience that started us thinking about the relationship between culture and technology. We do not know the nature, power, or extent of the process of cultural mediation. But, the cultural mediation of technology is, we believe, much more likely to be rendered invisible to people who are culture-bound, unable to stand as outsiders and consider a culture critically.

Critical thinking requires the ability to stand aside from one's experiences and view them as an interested stranger. Our travels helped us learn about foreign cities. However, our experiences also made us, to some extent, strangers in our own land. Very little seems to fit together quite the way it did before we left. Ways of being, methods of organization, and assumptions once taken for granted now seem open to question and challenge.

Movement in one's home city is often movement within a cultural cocoon that characteristically places one with the same sort of people (same class, same race, same age group, and so on) in the same places (a car, the bus, school, shop, unemployment office, pool hall, street corner) at the same times (7:30 a.m., noon, 3:15 p.m., 11:00 p.m.). There are, of course, public events and institutions that a variety of people participate in and share. However, even under these circumstances one tends to

participate in a way characteristic of one's "kind." Indeed, the type of public place frequented and the nature and degree of that participation tends to be culturally defined.

When we traveled, our constant dropping in and out of cities and cultures and our status as visitors, guests, strangers, foreigners scrambled the normal points of demarcation that defined the boundaries of our cultural cocoon. We came to think that much of what is called sophistication or street sense is the ability to experience and survive in a city within a given *cultural context* and that what is regarded as *possible* is a social construction that resides inside people.

Schooling

Our travels encouraged in us the kind of critical thought that is so highly valued in the philosophy and goals of American public education. It is at the seam of experience and one's capacity to use experience that the school curriculum can no doubt most effectively be employed to encourage critical thinking. This would be true for schools in any number of settings. Urban schools, however, hold particular promise.

Cities are the center of human civilization. In the past several hundred years, cities of the Western world have become home to increasingly diverse populations. Cities are where old and new technological and cultural forms come into sharpest focus by their contrast. The monuments, museums, and shopping districts are themselves the textbooks of the civilization. The city presents a bewildering array of similarities and contrasts to be experienced, questioned, understood. Streetcars, theaters, department stores, and museums are not part of the natural world; they are made by humans and subject to

human control. Yet they are, for the most part, presented in the curriculum as static artifacts of an unchanging cultural landscape. Children are taken on field trips to use the resources of the city, but the nature of those resources is not itself usually examined. It is as if the cities' resources were a vast kinetic Sears Catalog to be paged through but not thought about.

It is not difficult to imagine a field trip by school children in London to the British Museum to visit the Egyptian exhibit. On the surface we have a pretty straightforward proposition; a group of children off to learn something about Egyptian civilization by examining some of its artifacts. The children arrive at the museum after a short ride on the subway, walk from the station to the museum, go through the entrance, turn left, and confront, for the first time, the Rosetta Stone. The explicit content of the lesson would be clear enough to most teachers; that is, a lesson on Egyptian history. A number of questions immediately come to mind: What is the Rosetta stone? Why is it important? Who discovered it? And so on. These are not unimportant questions. They are, however, incomplete and outside a critical cultural context. Other questions might include: Why is public transportation in England among the most costly in Europe? Who lives in the neighborhood between the subway and the museum? Why is the Rosetta stone in the British Museum in London instead of in a museum in Cairo? Who decides that a museum will be built? Who pays for it? The foundation of critical thought is the capacity to consider that human beings participate in the writing of human history and that each of us is not merely subject to, but acts upon, the environment into which we are born. Therefore the nature of the city and its resources is *itself* open to question.



Implications for City Schools and Their Curriculum

1. *Schools as Laboratories.* Schools can be made the laboratories for studying not only what is in a city; they can also be laboratories for discovering how a city works and analyzing why it works that way. For children growing up in an urban environment this would often amount to helping them understand and gain control over experiences common to the city—to gain control by understanding such common experiences as unemployment, cultural festivals, public transportation, race relations, and by developing the capacity to work cooperatively with others to project a vision on the world.

2. *Cooperation as a Curricular Value.* If the city is, as some have asserted, in essence a socialist enterprise requiring widespread cooperation for common benefit, then the ability to work cooperatively with others is an essential ability in an urban environment. The commonsense assertion that one person can do very little is rarely translated into such questions as "How many others will it take to do this?" or "How can I join with others to accomplish that?" Instead, a single person's



Photos from left to right: the Overseas Terminal, Wellington, New Zealand; le Pont-Neuf, Paris, France; and Fox Glacier, Westland, New Zealand.



powerlessness is taken to mean either that history can only be made by heroes (perhaps a man on a white horse?) or that powerlessness is an unchangeable part of the human condition. Critical investigation of the sort we are proposing calls for cooperative action. Therefore, cooperation is an essential curricular value.

3. *Posing Problems in the Curriculum.* Every day millions of people sit stalled in traffic jams, breathing air fouled by exhaust fumes. They rule out travel to some part of the city because

they are afraid, or travel only through neighborhoods where virtually everyone is the same color, or everyone is poor, or wealthy. They read about, see, or experience some act of senseless violence and shrug their shoulders and think, "That's just the way things are," or, "There will always be poverty," or, "That's just human nature." In other words, cultural phenomena are thought of in the same manner as natural events. The effect of such thinking is to withdraw the possibility for critical thought and action. For, indeed, if cities are like

the tides, then they are to be experienced but not altered. Learning to ask how and why in relation to the nature of an urban environment requires that aspects of that environment be made problematic. Discovering how to make topics such as transportation, race, poverty, intergenerational conflict, and violence problematic is an important task of schools.

4. *The Basics in a Context.* To describe schools as laboratories for the city is not to diminish the importance of reading, writing, and arithmetic; it is to put them at the service of practical investigations of the urban environment. There are plenty of ways of achieving this result—by raising critical questions about city resources (museums, zoos, manufacturing facilities), by having students survey their own neighborhood (or block or apartment building) so they can see themselves in relation to the city's environment and its problems and promise, and cooperate with others while doing so. Students who participate in such investigations will find various aspects of the city's environment to which they are strangers and in relation to which they are uncomfortable. As a result they will begin to see their own familiar surroundings not as given but as created by human action and subject to change through human action. Within such a critical context, reading, writing, and arithmetic can be transformed from "subjects" into tools that are harnessed to purposes students have identified as important.

5. *Curriculum as an Experiment.* Our ideas no doubt sound as if we believe the curriculum should be an experiment. We do. In one aspect, Paris is a useful metaphor for what we are talking about. Paris was an uncomfortable city for both of us. It was also very challenging and thought-provoking. Paris was the most experimental city we visited. We were constantly struck by splashes of color in unexpected places, the design of a public place or building, or perhaps live chamber music in a subway station. Although we often did not like what we saw or felt uncomfortable with it, we were challenged to reconsider our concept of human possibility. In a similar fashion schools should challenge their students.

Uses and Misuses of School Programs

We are not proposing that school programs themselves solve problems outside the school. The purpose of the

school curriculum, as we envision it, is to enable students to address questions of significance to their lives outside the school. Two examples, one from Great Britain and one from New Zealand, may help illustrate our point.

The Bristol Human Relations Program

The 1960s were a period of economic expansion in Great Britain, as it was for most of the Western world. During this period the British government encouraged immigration from Commonwealth countries. Enough of the immigrants were non-white to transform Great Britain into a multi-racial, multi-ethnic society. As the British economy floundered through the 70s and into the 80s, racial tensions increased considerably. An important part of the government's response has been to fund "human relations" programs in the schools. We paid a brief visit to one of the largest of these programs, which is located in Bristol.

At the time of our visit the program had just been investigated by a parliamentary commission because there had been a race riot in Bristol some months before. While the quality of the Bristol human relations program could be assessed according to any number of different criteria, the criteria actually employed were political—was the program easing racial tensions in Bristol? In other words, the government had, for its own purposes, defined racial tensions as fundamentally an educational problem whose solution was a human relations program. The predictable "failure" of the program enabled the government to continue to contain the debate to the adequacy or inadequacy of the human relations curriculum, and in so doing avoid scrutiny of its employment and housing policies in relation to racial unrest. Using a school program as an instrument of government policy designed to directly intervene in a social problem is not the same as involving students in the study of their environment to enable them to participate in society in a way that empowers them. The former process assumes a solution is known and has only to be learned; the latter assumes students will participate in both framing the problem and identifying the solutions.

New Zealand's Correspondence School

It seems strange that our final example comes from New Zealand because it is a

very rural country. Its population of just over 3 million occupy a geographic area somewhat smaller than California. Over one million of New Zealand's inhabitants live in one city, Auckland, and many families live quite a distance from any human settlement. This poses problems for New Zealand's educational system. It is impractical to transport many children to school each day because of the distance involved and the rough terrain. It is equally difficult to establish boarding schools because children are needed to work on the farms with their families. In response to these problems and as a direct result of citizen pressure, the Correspondence School was established in 1922 with one teacher and 167 students. The Correspondence School has, from its inception, enjoyed widespread public support.

The school's pre-school through twelfth grade curriculum follows the same outline used by schools all over New Zealand. The difference is that the curriculum comes to the student in the mail in the form of teacher-developed units. These units vary from more or less standard math or language materials to activities designed for pre-school children and their parents, to sewing lessons, to tape-recorded foreign language exercises, to industrial arts projects—all available through the mail. Tax-paying New Zealand citizens, 15 and older, anywhere in the world may enroll in the Correspondence School for a fee of \$10. Children under 15 may participate in the school's program free of charge. The materials used and the cost of mailing them is paid for by the government. The school's curriculum serves several purposes; it is the sole curriculum for some students in rural areas; it supplements the educational programs of small schools; and it is available to adults for whatever educational purpose they have in mind.

While we would have wished for a more critical edge to some of the curriculum materials, the context within which the materials were provided did itself provide a critical content. Through the medium of correspondence, curriculum materials, regardless of their explicit content, are of necessity connected to the students' everyday experiences.

The Correspondence School is the best example that we found of a school program designed to serve the purposes of its students. Although it is a program developed in a rural country to serve rural students, the nature of its relation

to students is very suggestive for city schools as well.

Conclusion

Urban schools can use the city in a particular way to help students critically consider their environment and in so doing find the necessity for tools such as reading, writing, and arithmetic. Neither schools nor societies are static, homogeneous, or immutable. Schools and cultures are filled with contradictory aspects and tendencies and they exist in a relationship of both support and challenge. The contradictory aspects of cultures and schools are brought into sharp focus in cities. Our experiences traveling led us to believe the curriculum work done in a school is not an all-or-nothing proposition. Our work as educators in city schools is to use the contradictory aspects of city life to explore the possibilities in the school curriculum which encourage students to think critically and act responsibly. ■



Public Funding for Private Schools in the Netherlands

As Americans debate the merits of government support for non-public schools, they may be interested to know that in the Netherlands, public and private schools have received equal government financing since 1917. Some 70 percent of all primary schools are privately run, some by religious organizations and some by other groups. But nearly all can be considered as founded and administered by parents who want their children educated in accordance with their ideas.

All schools must be sponsored by a legally recognized institution or association. If the organization can demonstrate that the number of children expected to attend a proposed school will meet the legally prescribed minimum, the local municipality must provide the necessary funds (which are reimbursed by the state). In addition, each municipality must ensure that there are sufficient public schools open to all children irrespective of religion and that there is an overall balance in the types of

schools available.

The funding formula is not the same for all types of education. The arrangement for nursery and primary differs from that for secondary education, and higher and apprenticeship education have their own provisions. In general, however, schools are reimbursed for the cost of land and buildings, rentals, furnishings, operating expenses, and salaries.

The influence of the Ministry of Education is confined to ensuring that teachers meet minimum standards and requiring that certain subjects be taught. The same teacher qualifications and salary regulations apply to public and private schools alike. Private schools appoint their own personnel and are to a great extent free to develop curricula. Nationwide examinations guarantee the equivalence of all Dutch certificates and give access to higher education.

Parents' contributions are modest, mainly for expenses for books, excursions, and special provisions. School fees are not required for nurs-

ery or primary education and for the early years of secondary education. Beyond that, a fee according to financial strength applies, with a maximum of \$360 per child per year for private as well as public schools.

As a consequence of these regulations there is no competition between schools because of financial differences although there is competition on the basis of educational differences. Because of the quality of education in public and private schools, and because in many cases the parents have more influence in private than in public schools, interest in private education is steadily growing, despite decreasing denominational tendencies.

The policy of equal financing for state and private education is unique to the Netherlands and is greatly prized by the Dutch nation. ■

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