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Production, Cure, or Translation? Rehumanizing Education and the Roles of Teacher and Student in US Schools and Universities

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ABSTRACT Concerned about the dehumanization of teachers and students throughout the history of schooling in the United States, the author critically analyzes two metaphors for education that have perennially shaped educational practices in the United States: education is production and education is a cure. Drawing on a set of commitments that could re-humanize education, she proposes an alternative – education is translation – and discusses what it would require of educators in schools, universities, and programs of teacher education to embrace this re-humanizing metaphor.

> The school has been converted into the most dehumanizing institution that I have ever laid eyes upon. (Rice, 1893, p. 31)

> Recent federal policy in the US is dehumanizing the teaching profession. (Darling-Hammond, 2004a)

What enduring characteristics of US educational policies, institutions, and practices prompted critics at the end of the nineteenth century and again at the beginning of the twenty-first to use the descriptive term 'dehumanizing', and how might we best discern and analyze those characteristics with the goal of re-humanizing education? The underlying assumptions and expectations we have regarding the purposes of education and, specifically, the roles of teachers and students are vividly illuminated by the metaphors used to describe education in the United States. Two of the most prevalent and powerful metaphors – *education is production* and *education is a cure* – yield associated metaphors that assign teachers various kinds and degrees of authority and humanity – as factory workers, machines, or managers and as diagnosticians or therapists, respectively – and cast students in passive and largely dehumanized roles – as products or patients. I argue here and elsewhere (Cook-Sather, 2001, 2003, 2006a) against

these dominant metaphors, and I propose an alternative – *education is translation* – that offers a generative conceptual framework within which teachers can analyze their notions of education, students, and themselves toward the end of re-humanizing education.

In the following discussion I provide a brief overview of the two dominant metaphors for education in the United States, associated metaphors for teachers and students, and educational notions and practices that result. In contrast to these, I identify educational commitments that have the potential to support a more human and humane approach to education. Drawing on these commitments as integral to the alternative metaphor I propose, I define what I mean by *education is translation* and suggest how schools, universities, and programs of teacher education might embrace this metaphor. I focus in my conclusion on what conceptualizing education as translation requires of us as educators.

Production and Cure: dominant metaphors for education in the USA

Embodying the drive toward efficiency that was born of the industrial revolution in the United States, the first metaphor I mention above – *education is production* – casts teachers as factory workers, as machines, or as managers, and it casts students as products of the factory that is the school. As the following three examples illustrate, these are metaphors that teachers themselves use as well as metaphors used about teachers. When *a teacher is a factory worker*, she is assumed to be unskilled and able to function only under tight supervision, and her students are 'products to be molded, tested against common standards, and inspected carefully before being passed on to the next workbench for further processing' (Schlechty, 1991, p. 21). When *a teacher is 'a well-ordered machine'*, as one teacher describes himself, he works within a set time frame in pursuit of pre-set goals and objectives, and his job is to 'take a student from this point to that point' (Efron & Joseph, 2001, p. 78). Finally, when the teacher is the mastermind that oversees the work of production, *the teacher is an executive* – 'the manager of a kind of production line, where students enter the factory as raw material and are somehow "assembled" as persons' (Fenstermacher & Soltis, 1992, p. 16). Regardless of the degree and kind of authority a teacher has within this metaphorical framework, education is a mechanical process focused on efficiency, uniformity, and control at the expense of the humanity of both teachers and students.

A second metaphor – *education is a cure* – suggests that the school is a hospital or a clinic, and two associated metaphors cast the teacher as clinician. One is that *a teacher is a diagnostician* who sees himself as 'an observer, scrutinizer, and assessor, as well as an engaged leader' (Solomon, 1999, p. xvi) and who offers to each student the response that 'the child needs to complete the process he's engaged in at any given moment' (Hawkins, 1969, p. 53). A second metaphor has its roots in progressive models of education and in the

advent of various forms of psycho-analysis, where these work to humanize education: *a teacher is a therapist* – 'an empathetic person charged with helping individuals grow personally and reach a high level of self-actualization, understanding, and acceptance' (Fenstermacher & Soltis, 1992, p. 4). *Education is a cure* and its associated metaphors create schools and educational practices that, although ostensibly more humane than *education is production*, cast students as in need of diagnosis and healing and expect teachers to follow highly prescribed approaches for effecting that healing. Nowhere is the language of this metaphor more pervasive than in special education and remedial programs in US schools – two places where one is most likely to find academic '"casualities"' (Schlechty, 1991, p. 27).

Blending the least empowering aspects of these legacies of efficiency and cure, recent federal legislation in the United States (No Child Left Behind, 2001) has spawned various forms of scripted and prescribed curricula that are imposed on teachers, and students are under more pressure than ever to prove their fitness by performing well on standardized tests. Indeed, if teachers and students do not perform according to these standardized measures, schools can be placed on failing lists and taken over by state or private agencies. The irony of the law's name is that many children (and teachers) are being left behind within what Darling-Hammond (2004b) describes as a 'one-way accountability system that holds children and educators to test-based standards they are not enabled to meet, while it does *not* hold federal or state governments to standards that would ensure equal and adequate educational opportunity' (p. 6).

While such federal legislation has yet directly to affect college and university settings (although it is threatening to), many subscribe consciously or unconsciously to the notion that education at the post-secondary level is also about creating useful student products or remedying students' deficits and deficiencies: The assumption is that knowledge should be handed down from one generation to the next in efficient and curative ways, with control of both content and process safely in the hands of the professors. This model assumes that within each discipline the professor is the supreme local authority on the subject, the expert to whom a student is apprenticed. Although one finds less extreme manifestations of *education is production* and *education is a cure* in college and universities than one finds in primary and secondary educational contexts, many institutions of higher learning have yet to embrace in deliberate and systematic ways more human and humane models of education.

As the teaching profession is increasingly de-professionalized, universities increasingly outdated in their models of knowledge production and dissemination, schooling increasingly standardized and dehumanized, and students and teachers increasingly alienated by all these trends, it is now more than ever essential to provide alternative visions and practices for the education that unfolds in US schools and universities. In the next section, I identify educational commitments that have the potential to support more human and also more empowering educational practices than those fostered by *education is production* and *education is a cure*.

Qualities of More Human and Empowering Education

Like others concerned with the ways of thinking about and enacting education fostered by the dominant metaphors for education discussed above, I wanted a metaphor that might change the ways that people conceptualize and support formal learning. Specifically, I wanted a metaphor that frames education as a social as well as individual process of constructing meaning and making change, conceptualizes teachers as facilitators and co-learners, not managers or healers, and casts learners as active agents, not passive recipients, in their learning and the development of themselves. Indeed, the kind of education that, I argue, is most engaging and effective builds on the following notions and commitments:

- *Learning unfolds according to constructivist principles.* Learners engage both individually and socially to construct and co-construct knowledge. Knowledge is not delivered to learners by expert adults intent on producing copies of themselves or curing student ignorance, nor are adults finished with their learning processes simply by virtue of being more experienced academically than their students. Instead, classrooms are conceptualized as spaces within which learners with varying degrees and kinds of experiences work together not only to construct knowledge but also to construct selves.
- *Power is reconceptualized and risks invited and supported.* Both teachers and students reconceptualize themselves as essential and active participants in education. This is not simply a matter of learning a particular set of discourse practices, it is a matter of becoming a person who recognizes herself and is recognized by others as a legitimate participant within that discourse. This ability can only be developed if teachers and students create spaces together that inspire trust and if teachers and students trust themselves to take risks within those spaces. The balance between challenge and support, between guidance and response, is one that, like the content of what is learned, must be continually negotiated between the teacher and the students. In other words, the learning process requires 'mutual teacher-student authority' (Shor, 1992, p. 16).
- *Education includes time for reflection and analysis.* It is only in the critical contemplation of experience that one can really make sense of what one experiences – make a meaningful connection between what was lived and what was learned. To have the experience but miss the meaning is to not learn. Education is about repeatedly making meaning anew through reflection, reinterpretation, and reiteration, and both teachers and students must be afforded time and support for such processes.
- *The learner as the primary actor in her education.* Far from being passive, dependent, and submitted to prescribed, scripted, rote, and often meaningless forms of education, learners are knowledgeable, active, and interdependent as they work to create meaningful versions of understandings and selves.

To support the kind of education such commitments can foster, I offer *education is translation.* My hope is that teachers at all levels of formal schooling will find

the metaphor useful and perhaps even empowering for the ways that it challenges dominant notions of education and evokes alternatives.

Education is Translation

'To translate' is most often understood to mean the making of a new version of a text by rendering it in one's own or another's language. The term has other powerful meanings, however, that carry it beyond the realm of textual rendering and make it particularly appropriate as a metaphor for more humane and empowering educational processes. To translate can mean to bear, remove, or change from one place or condition to another. It can also mean to change the form, expression, or mode of expression of, so as to interpret or make tangible, and thus to carry over from one medium or sphere into another. And to translate can mean to change completely, to transform (*Webster's New International Dictionary*, 1951).

I propose that we conceptualize education both literally and metaphorically in terms of this range of definitions with the learner understood as both the translator and the subject of her own translation. The most obvious learner within this metaphorical framework is the student with the teacher as an active, engaged supporter of student translations, but a teacher must also be a perpetual learner engaged in her own ongoing translations.

The literal and the metaphorical aspects of translation always work together; they are inseparable. In the literal sense, when one undertakes a formal educational experience, one must learn to recognize a new vocabulary, think in new ways, and speak and write using these new ways of thinking and these new words. If one engages in these processes fully, one translates oneself in a more metaphorical sense: A learner who genuinely engages in well-designed formal education changes her condition, makes herself comprehensible to others in a new sphere, makes a new version of herself, is transformed. These processes are never finished; they are always open to further revision and always lead to further re-renderings. In both the translation of language and the translation of self, one preserves something of the original or previous versions, and one renders a new version appropriate to a new context and to the relationships with oneself, with others, and with the content one explores within that context.

Understanding education as translation highlights its language-based nature, claiming the rich, complex, human processes of interpretation, expression, and communication as central to learning. It also highlights the centrality of both preservation and change to education: a translation is always at once duplication, revision, and re-creation, with meaning lost, preserved, and created anew with different textures, boundaries, and resonances. Never the substitution of word for word, a translation is the 're-articulation of a complex human experience' (Constantine, 1999, p. 15), and a translation of a self is always a re-articulation of that self. Thus, when one undertakes an educational challenge, one must translate words, ways of thinking, ways of interacting, and

ways of being. (For more detailed discussions, see Cook-Sather, 2001, 2003, 2006a.)

If educators were to conceptualize education as translation, teaching would need to be reconceptualized such that students and teachers were both perceived and positioned differently within their own and others' education. Teachers would need to reject the underlying metaphors of production and cure, even while having to contend with the increasing standardization of education. Embracing constructivist principles of learning, reconceptualizing power in the classroom, creating time for critical reflection, and ensuring that the learner is the primary actor in and subject of her education – both the translator and the thing translated – would help ensure that what happens in classrooms is more human and humane as well as more empowering. As I discuss elsewhere, teacher education can also be translation, with students positioned as teachers as well as learners (Cook-Sather, 2002a, b, 2006a, b; Cook-Sather & Youens, 2007) and teacher educators serving as supporters and facilitators of prospective teachers' translations of themselves (Cook-Sather, 2001, 2006a). The interpretive frame and the language that *education is translation* provides have the potential to transform educational processes and the roles of those involved in those processes at all levels of education.

Conclusion

My call to understand education as translation and to redefine the roles and responsibilities of teacher and student accordingly means we must be willing as educators to relinquish traditional forms of power while embracing others. It means we must be willing to follow as well as lead, listen carefully to others' perspectives as well as carefully share our own, and allow ourselves to be destabilized by both these reciprocal processes. We cannot be inured, inflexible, certain, or set; rather, we must assume the same risks of interpretation, expression, and revision we ask learners to take in the process of education.

The re-humanization of education and the role of teacher and student I call for here is not a recipe for happiness or comfort; it won't release either teachers or learners from struggling with the profound limits both within and outside of ourselves. But it has the potential to make both teachers and learners more open, imaginative, and flexible, more able to act on those more open attitudes, more perceptive, responsive and articulate, more alive. It has the potential to help us avoid the feeling of paralysis many teachers and learners experience when confronted by new, unreadable, or uninterpretable ideas, people, and situations. It has the potential to move us from being stuck in something – a mindset, a position, a particular form of articulation – and toward a more responsible and responsive place: better able to read and re-read a text, scene, or relationship, better able to take others' perspectives, needs, resources into account and, in turn, better able to act more responsibly. It requires that we all be willing to take on, again and again, the demanding work of making intelligent meaning and taking responsible action even – perhaps especially –

within the confines of increasingly standardized and dehumanizing circumstances.

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