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## Thematic Cluster

### Making Sense of Making Sense

(Jeff Bloom's Strand)

## Contexts of Learning: Part 1

Jeff Bloom

When we think about learning, we usually associate most learning with schools, followed by home and the influence parents have had on our learning. Both of these contexts are relatively structured. Schools tend to be highly structured and controlled contexts, while learning at home has a variable structure that may vary along a continuum of more structured routines of reading books and playing games to the unstructured learning of relationships, values, and so forth.

*As a young child, my mother read books to me. She was an avid reader, although only formally educated in school through grade 10. Starting when I was about 4 years old, she taught me how to iron clothes and prepare food. My father, who was*

*not a good reader, and who left school after grade 5, taught me how to make and fix things, as well as how to operate tools safely and how to be an alert helper. Such learning from both of my parents has been valuable throughout my life. However, there were other things that I learned from them and other relatives that I have spent the rest of my life trying to “unlearn.” Although they were hardworking, decent people, their prejudices ran deeply. Fortunately, I encountered many other learning contexts that usurped that early learning. However, such unlearning or relearning in a different way has required continual attentiveness to keep biases of all kinds at the surface where they can be noticed and kept at bay.*

Such unstructured contexts of learning are probably the sources of a great deal, if not most, learning. For me, the other unstructured contexts included roaming around the area where I lived while exploring and playing with neighborhood friends. We got hurt, got into minor trouble, and pushed some limits of possibilities. As will be discussed later, much of our learning involved what Gregory Bateson referred to as three ways we find the limits of the possible, which are through play, exploration, and crime. We certainly dabbled in all three, although “crime” was more mischief than criminal. However, we also elaborated on school topics, such as rocks, minerals, and insects. We would come home from school after science classes and go out on meandering expeditions looking for, gathering, and catching whatever we could find. Upon our return home, we set up little mini-museums on our porches.

I suspect that most of our learning does not occur within formal contexts, but rather in the contexts of everyday life. And, even within the contexts of schools and other formal settings, much of our deeper learning does not involve the intentional content presented by teachers. This deeper learning involves what is not taught and is not part of the *explicit curriculum*. Schools also teach a lot of misinformation within the explicit curriculum. [1] The *null curriculum* omits certain information that may be important to know as a citizen of whatever country one lives, but which has been omitted from the curriculum. Schools typically do not teach about topics that will detract from students’ “patriotic” and biased learning about their own country. Schools in the United States do not teach very much about slavery, the Vietnam War, the problematic issues of various Presidents and other politicians, and so forth. There is another type of curriculum called the *implicit curriculum* from which most deeply integrated learning occurs. This curriculum is the manifestation of the social relations, the values, and personal psychological characteristics expected of students. Such learning involves (a)

conforming to some arbitrary standard of behavior; (b) being blindly obedient to teachers and administrators; (c) never questioning authority, (d) memorizing without understanding; (d) always being subservient; (e) never taking responsibility, even though teachers say that want students to be responsible; and (f) staying focused on one topic and never making connections to other contexts and personal experiences. This is just a partial list of the types of things that are drummed into children from the moment they start going to school. Note that items, (a), (b), and (c) are anti-democratic behaviors, that subvert any notions that schools teach children to be good citizens.[2]

Learning in schools is learning *about* something.[3] The “learning about” approach mostly involves the memorization of fragmented and de-contextualized information, for the sole purpose of spitting it back on tests. The half-life of memorized materials is quite short and quickly forgotten or lost in the jumble of disconnected and irrelevant information. Any deeper knowledge of such information is dependent upon the individual students and how they relate such information to previous knowledge and experiences or upon how they take it upon themselves to explore that particular topic on their own. If schools emphasized “*teaching as*,” “*teaching beyond*,” “*teaching of*,” “*teaching with*,” “*teaching across*,” and “*teaching through*,” which takes on an immersive and engaged approach to teaching and learning, students’ learning will more closely resemble the kind of everyday learning that is part of one’s personal “epistemology” or knowledge frameworks.[4] This type of learning has an incredibly long half-life compared to rote memory. We will take a deeper look at this kind of teaching and learning in a later posting in this thematic cluster series.

At this point, we have taken a brief look at three basic contexts of learning: (a) the null curriculum, or what is, for the most part, purposefully not taught; (b) the implicit curriculum, or what is embedded in the social dynamics of the school, but which does not appear in the explicit curriculum although some of this may appear in school policy documents and other materials; and (c) the explicit curriculum, or what is presented directly to students. The other contexts of learning within the overall context of school include:

- The contexts that make up the **social dynamics in the classroom and school**, including cliques and other group and individual relationships.

The relationships between children in schools can be problematic. Children gang up on specific children who in one way or another do not fit in with that group. A shy child, an overweight child, a child from a different racial or cultural group, a child with a particular health issue or disability, and a child who is different in some other way are often the targets of teasing, bullying, or just passive exclusion and marginalization. Other children may feel that they need to act out in a certain way to be accepted by the larger group or to cover up some sense of inadequacy or learning disability. And, still others may just withdraw and not relate at all.

- **Teacher—student relational dynamics.**

Some teachers create and maintain a psychosocial distance and an air of authority. As a result, students tend not to feel at all like they have some sort of mutual relationship with the teacher. I've met some teachers who just don't like children. Other teachers default to frequently yelling at students. Fortunately, most teachers seem to at least try to develop relationships of mutual respect, trust, and caring.

- **Parental involvement in school.**

Many parents do not involve themselves in parent—teacher organizations, communicating with their children's teachers, or attending school board meetings. Some do not even show up for parent—teacher nights. Much of this disconnection from their children's schools is due to both parents in families having to work, sometimes multiple jobs. In addition, some parents had such horrible experiences in schools that they have a great deal of hesitation about going into a school building. Other parents feel awkward going into a school, because of immigration status, language barriers, and so forth. And, then there are parents who just see school as a way to get their kids out of the house and do not really care about their kids or their education. Of course, there are parents who have or somehow take the time to develop relationships with teachers and other parents.

- **Parental involvement in their children's learning.**

As with the previous point, some parents just do not have the time or energy to help their children with their school learning. They may have exhausting jobs, or work two or three different jobs, and just do not have the time or energy to help their children. Some parents may feel like they do not have the knowledge or abilities to help their children, while others just don't care. Then, there are other parents who range from supporting and helping their children in any way they can to those who push and exert incredible pressures on their children to maintain high achievement and often to participate in all sorts of other activities outside of school.

- The characteristics and nature of **social dynamics in the community**.

Communities or neighborhoods vary in their cohesiveness and support of local schools. Neighborhoods vary along continua from poor to wealthy, from low violent crime to high violent crime, from low family-oriented to low family-oriented, from low degrees of social relationships to high degrees of social relationships, from low degrees of school support to high degrees of school support, and so forth. The specific nature of each community affects the children who live in these communities. No one mix of the previous continua is necessarily free of issues that affect children emotionally and intellectually.

- The **economic, legal, and political contexts of schooling** are assumed to be “just the way it is,” and yet can have huge, and not often positive, effects on children's learning. The *amount of funding* for specific schools and how that funding is used can effect many of the other contexts described here as well as the quality of children's learning. Funding can affect the availability of equipment, supplies, materials, and other physical resources, such as gyms, swimming pools, science laboratories, libraries, art rooms, technology availability, music rooms and instruments, auditoriums, athletic fields and equipment, and teacher salaries and benefits. The disparities in funding between poor and wealthy neighborhoods is shocking.[5] The laws that affect schooling can affect children and families in many ways. Mandated attendance, required number of hours in specific subjects, and so forth, can prevent more creative approaches to addressing important learning. Many laws ban the teaching of certain concepts and theories that are essential to developing more thorough and accurate understanding of certain subject

matters areas, such as history, social studies, science, the arts, and literature. Some laws ban books and other reading material that are almost always important to the growth, development, and learning of our young people.[6] And, now, a number of states are banning any reference to certain topics (e.g., LGBTQ, slavery, etc.), all of which are explicitly supporting and promoting bigotry. Politics not only is interwoven into the economic and legal contexts of schooling, but also is a primary force in mandating what is taught and how that material is taught. Such political mandates are made by people with little, if any, experience in and knowledge of teaching and learning. And, if they have subject matter knowledge, this knowledge is often that of the expert specialist, which is fine, but usually does not include two big areas of knowledge that is necessary to make that subject area knowledge accessible to children, and especially to children from diverse cultural and racial backgrounds. What is assumed as an appropriate topic or example to include in a curriculum may very well be very problematic for a Native American child. For example, for some Native American children the study of snakes or owls can be a very big and costly problem for the family of the child, where actual contact with such animals requires significant time and large amounts of money for ceremonies to counter the damage that is believed to have been done by such contact. A different, less dramatic and expensive, but insidious example of another problem with curricular and teaching method mandates, is in the difference in cultural ways of learning. For many Native American or other indigenous people, the “best” learning occurs through the telling of stories, through argument, and through a sort of modeling or mentorship, which can include inquiring into various phenomena.[7] On the other hand, most mandated curriculums, especially the “teacher-proof” curriculums,[8] rely on lectures, memorizing, and other rote learning activities that are contrary to the way many different cultural groups learn. However, such mandated approaches to teaching and learning are fundamentally contrary to the way children learn naturally, as we will see throughout this thematic cluster.

- The **arrangements and décor of classrooms** communicate a great deal about teachers and their beliefs, biases, emotions, and a whole range of ideas about teaching, learning, children, and so forth.

A room with the desk in front of a whiteboard and desks in perfectly aligned rows communicates a view of teaching where the teacher is the authority over students who must pay attention to the teacher and not engage with other students. A classroom, where the teacher's desk is off to the side of the room, which could even be occupied by students from time to time, and with students sitting around tables, communicates a very different idea of how students learn. In such classrooms, students spend most of their time engaged with other students. Classroom walls dominated by various posters and other materials that have been purchased by the teacher communicates a very different view of learning and students than walls dominated by what the children have posted on the walls, which might include their own work as well as items they find to be of interest and want to share with others. Such classrooms communicate a very different view of the status and engagement of children.

- The actual **physical characteristics of the school.**

Like the previous item about classrooms, the arrangement and design of the school communicates a view of learning, teaching, teachers, and children, as well as the sort of philosophy of education altogether. The more recent movement in contemporary school design is to eliminate or vastly reduce the windows in classrooms. Although many rationales may be offered for this design, the most insidious of these rationales has to do with eliminating the “distractions” windows present to students. The question of student boredom is never considered. An implicit message is that learning has nothing to do with the outside world. The behavior of birds, the movement of the Sun, the changing weather patterns, or even a car accident outside have nothing to do with learning. In fact, there is an implicit message that being outside is a waste of time and not good. Newer schools look and feel like prisons, which is a further extension of expecting students to behave like prisoners, where they have to sit quietly, walk in lines, and be obedient.



A windowed elementary-middle school in 2023.



A highly windowed junior high from 1960.



Windowless elementary school in 2024.

*When I started teaching in a rural elementary school back in the 1980's, the bell rang for lunch. I walked over to the door and the children were wiggling and looking at me quizzically, while I'm looking at them wondering what's going on. Finally, a few children asked, "do you want us to line up?" I asked, "Do you think we can make it to the cafeteria without lining up?" They responded in unison, "yes!" Amazingly, we somehow managed to get to the cafeteria, get our lunches, and sit together around a table without walking in a line!.*

*A few months later, the new principal mandated that the cafeteria must be quiet. No talking allowed. She also announced that she would give awards to*

*the quietest classrooms. After that mandate and our first line-less entry into the cafeteria, everyone was sitting around the table quietly. After about 30 seconds, one child asked if they **had** to be quiet. I asked, “Do you want an award?” They all said, “no.” So, we all proceeded to talk normally and at a reasonable volume. We never got an award.*

Deeply entrenched in the paradigms of behaviorism and mechanism, such actions embed in children a disturbing view of how to perceive and act in what is promoted as a free and democratic society. In fact, the effects of actions arising out of behaviorism and mechanism implicitly teach students to behave in ways that are consistent with authoritarianism. And, now we wonder why so many people seem to be supporting authoritarianism in the United States and many other “democratic” nations around the world.

In addition to these contexts of the immediate physical surroundings of children, the contexts of technology, social media, news media, entertainment media, health, politics, economy, global relations, culture, food quality and availability, climate change, and so forth all affect children in many ways. Children’s ways of thinking about, coping with, and interacting with their worlds comprise their own complex contexts of meaning, which are both in part socially-shared and idiosyncratic.[9] This idea of “contexts of meaning” will be discussed in more detail later in this thematic cluster.

All of these contexts intermingle in a matrix of individually and socially created interdependencies. At the same time, the official storyline that schools are necessary to getting jobs and making money and to participating in society permeates this contextual matrix. Most students and parents buy into this storyline, because they have never experienced or heard of any sort of markedly different alternative. In fact, teachers and administrators fall in line with the same storyline. Even most so-called “alternative schools” are just another version of the same approach.

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Contrary to the assumption that all real learning occurs in schools, learning is actually occurring all of the time. Babies start learning when they enter the world, if not before birth. All of the sounds, smells, sights, and the myriad of other sensations, along with their initial connections to mothers, fathers, and other people in their world, become the

immediate material for making sense of what is happening around them. They listen to sounds and begin trying to repeat them as they learn language without being taught. They categorize objects in their world and soon have a rather sophisticated categorization scheme and can discriminate subtle differences in appearance and action. As they grow, they explore all parts of their worlds. They pick up on the nature and dynamics of social relationships even before they can talk, at least talk in ways that adults understand.[10][11]

Throughout our lives we are continually learning from all of our social interactions, as well as from our involvement with all types of media. If we live in cities, we learn how to negotiate travel, social interactions, and ways of behaving in a variety of situations that are specific to the cities we live in. If we live in rural settings, we also learn from our social interactions, but also from the forests, meadows, farmlands, deserts, rivers, lakes, and animals we encounter. If asked to describe what we have learned from our contexts of living, we may only be able to just touch the surface of what we have learned. Much of our learning may not even have words attached to it.

In the next two parts of “the contexts of schooling” we will explore the paradoxes that arise in these contexts in Part 2. In Part 3, we will delve into the double binds that manifest in the contexts of schooling, which trap and entangle students and teachers alike.

## Notes

- [1] Loewen, J. W. (2007). — Loewen’s book is a classic examination of some of the more egregious “lies” taught as truths in history classes. Such misrepresentations of existing knowledge also occur in English, science, social studies, and other courses in K—12 and even college and university courses.
- [2] Wood, G. (1990)
- [3] Bloom, J. (2022, January 1)
- [4] Bloom, J. (2022, January 1)
- [5] Kozol (1991)
- [6] See numerous chapters by different authors in Epp & Watkinson (1996).
- [7] •• Cordova (1981) •• McCarty & Bia (2002) •• A great deal of my knowledge about Native American beliefs and life have come from my interactions with Navajo, Hopi, and

Apache students, children, parents, teachers, colleagues, and friends in Arizona, as well as from visits to Navajo schools.

[8] •• Benegas (2019) •• Taylor (2010)

[9] • Bloom, J. W. (1990). • Bloom, J. W. (1992).

[10] Donaldson, M. C. (1978).

[11] Roy, D. (2011) — Fascinating study of a baby's speech development.

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