

THE EDUCATOR INFERNO: A CURRICULAR DESCENT

By Peaches Hash

Appalachian State University

When I taught twelfth grade English, an assignment that was quite popular amongst my students was a narrative paper in which they created their own “hells” or “heavens.” Structurally, it would mirror the unit’s extended text, Dante Alighieri’s (1980) *Inferno*, but the levels could be based on anything in their own lives, from the rules dictated by their helicopter parents to the mundane tasks of their part-time jobs. Being one of the only creative activities I was permitted to assign in this “college prep” course, I thoroughly enjoyed reading them, yet there was a clear wall between the teacher and students: They were asked to share something that could be personal, exposing, and traumatic, while I merely received it to grade.

I have always understood the power of modeling for students but was unwilling to do what I asked of them and write my own story of a “hell.” However, now that I am far removed from that school culture, in hindsight, I wonder: Was it because my past teaching positions *were* levels of my hell? Jokingly, I have undoubtedly referred to my previous public school jobs as some sort of hellish torture (and have countless first-hand experiences to support this claim), but many have argued that there is always some amount of truth within a joke. While I was wisecracking about my current situation, did I, like the character, Dante, witness suffering, unhappiness, and politically-based control? Was I trying to tell people, “ABANDON EVERY HOPE, WHO ENTER HERE” (Alighieri, 1980, p. 10)? Would a descent into my past reveal far more negatives about myself than positives? Now that those experiences are over, have I really emerged into a “paradise,” or am I in a purgatory, simply waiting to be guided further?

After working for five years at a public school in Tennessee, “I found myself within a shadowed forest / for I had lost the path that does not stray” (Alighieri, 1980, p. 2). No, I was not midway through my career, but teachers burn out far more quickly than many other professions. In my undergraduate education classes, I was pumped full of phrases such as “fairness is giving every child what he or she needs” (Lavoie, 1989, n.p.) and “schools guide students to knowledge,” but no one prepared me for the greedy she-wolf of school funding initiatives, the fraudulent leopard of state testing, or the prideful lion of administration (Alighieri, 1980). Though I always scored a “4” on my final evaluations (a “3” is “meets expectations” and a “5” is the highest score possible), these beasts kept making their ways closer to me. My curriculum did not matter, and I saw no path. I was deep in the forest, forgetting why I even entered it to begin with. Why did no one warn me that teaching is often really about fighting these “animals,” not educating students? Do I really desire to teach anymore? What is my ideology, and if I have one, does my curriculum reflect it? Sometimes, a hero, or teacher, or human must go through “hell” to get that answer.

THE EDUCATOR INFERNO

LEVEL ONE – THE CHALLENGING AND COMPETITIVE CLASSROOM

My “high” level of the Educator Inferno, near the entrance, would have to take place in my first classroom. The location is less severe mainly because I was young and unskilled in many areas, but meant well. Though officially a “Virginia city school,” my classes were populated by mostly rural, white students who desired nothing more

than to skip class to find the deer they shot in the woods the night before (and the parents happily would write this excuse verbatim). I, in contrast, had just graduated from a college that had high academic *standards*, and I saw it as my job to prepare these students according to those standards. Unfortunately, by adhering to the Scholar Academic ideology, I was more than likely imposing a hell on students who had vastly different life goals than my own (Schiro, 2013).

The “punishment” my students endured in this ideology was that, regardless of their interests, ability levels, or personal backgrounds, I expected them to “learn the accumulated knowledge of [*my*] culture: that of the academic disciplines” (Schiro, 2013, p. 4). Did I encourage any of those deer-hunting students to read a text centered on hunting or write a research paper involving that topic? Sadly, I did not. My students had so much to get through! Some, as tenth graders, had never read Shakespeare, written a full essay, or crafted a Works Cited page. Clearly, “the needs of children and society [had] little place in determining the content of the curriculum” (Schiro, 2013, p. 32). Though I would listen to their interests and personal stories, sometimes staying hours after school with a student who “needed to talk,” my curriculum was firm; there was no altering what I believed students needed to know to be successful in future classrooms.

Being the product of a competitive high school where I never felt intelligent until I left it, I taught the way I had seen: A “hierarchal community” where I was a “[teacher] of the truth” and my students were merely “learners of the truth” (Schiro, 2013, p. 4). As a student, I never thought my teachers learned from me; they were simply waiting to show me what to improve upon. *They* knew the truth that I waited to receive. Similarly, I did get to know many of my students on personal levels, but rarely did I ask for a book recommendation or consider that maybe their writing had a level of personality that my own education had prevented me from accessing. Because I taught the truth, if they succeeded later in life, (academically or in their careers), I could narcissistically think I helped contribute to their accomplishments.

Keep in mind that only the older version of myself recognizes this period of my career as negative. The students who thrived in my Scholar Academic teaching style and I formed close bonds despite the hierarchal nature of my classroom. After all, they saw me as their mediator “between the curriculum” and themselves (Schiro, 2013, p. 49). In a world where they could easily find anything they needed online, they and I both felt that they needed me to help them “understand” (or decode) the assigned texts. Like other teachers with a Scholar Academic ideology, I felt that, if I was not standing up in front of the room reading to them or dictating what something meant, I was not “teaching,” which is what students and society traditionally envision a teacher to be.

When adhering to the Scholar Academic ideology, I definitely had my “success stories”—students who could recall information in my class even after it had ended. Derek was not naturally interested in English, but he could *memorize* well. He could parrot any trivia from the texts back to me, which I glorified as a higher-order skill. The year after he had been my student, he would often return to “visit,” and one of his favorite past times was to pick up a worksheet or test from my desk and state the answers as if he learned them only days ago instead of a year ago. “You’re *so smart!*” I would exclaim to him, feeling like the best teacher in the world, and he would smile as if I had handed him a medal (or money). I had *taught* students like Derek something. Yes, he could have accessed any of that knowledge himself from a variety of other sources, but I was the one who determined the content and accuracy of the information. I told myself that higher-order, Scholar Academic skills, such as theoretical opinions

and deep analysis, could come later, certainly not at the tenth grade level where many students could not even recall minor characters' names from a text!

In my Scholar Academic stage, growth and skill were measured on their proficiency. I was "not shy or hesitant about giving tests, collecting data from tests, or using the data they collect to make comparisons" (Schiro, 2013, p. 52). Students were asked to memorize authors' names, themes I had dictated to them, and minute details of chapters to "check" if they had completed their reading homework. I considered everything on these lengthy tests "basic information," as it was all from "great works" of literature that other scholars had deemed as worthy of remembering (Schiro, 2013, p. 6). The curriculum was one that English scholars could take pride in: Without question, the "subject matter [came] first" (Schiro, 2013, p. 23).

Reflecting a Scholar Academic ideology, my tests were so stress-inducing that some students dropped the class to take "general" English, which was a feat I felt should be celebrated! My younger self saw it as "trimming the fat," or "weeding out the weak." The tests would take the full class time with students begging to stay after school to continue. Never were the questions multiple choice, as that would leave room for a student to guess and get the answer right. After a few of my tests, many of these students who had never taken a test without an "answer bank" or some form of hint decided to leave. The ones who were left in my class clearly had the ability, and the ones who showed "a lack of interest in the discipline or who [lacked] the ability to contribute to the discipline [were]...encouraged...to 'drop out'" (Schiro, 2013, p. 30). If students desired an "easier class," they could go. But, at what cost?

Alec, another student from my first year of teaching, "made it" through my class until December. He was one of the "big personalities" in class, always offering to read (with accents!) and ask questions of impressive depth. But, he was also unwilling to regurgitate the information I was seeking on tests; consequently, he failed his first semester exam. As I was packing up my bag for the holiday, he came in the room and told me he was going to drop. We had not even gotten to our Shakespeare unit yet, something I had envisioned him participating in since the beginning of the year, and I encouraged him to stay. "You could still pass for the year," I suggested, "Just study harder." But, he had already made up his mind. He lacked interest and did not wish to continue.

Alec left my classroom, but he did not leave my life. He often begged his other teacher to let him return, eliciting a response of "If you wanted to stay, you shouldn't have left" from her. He did not fit my ideology of an ideal student, but as a person, he had my respect. We became friends on social media after I left, and he still makes joking references to our class's content almost ten years after he was in it. I once told him how sad I had been that he had left, and he replied, "I probably could have done it. I really should have, but I didn't think you cared that much. That class was just too hard anyway." The curriculum came first to me, and I will always have to carry the regret of knowing that I lost some of the brightest, most interesting students along the way. Now, I know that it is the students, not me, who make the curriculum come alive, but I have realized it too late for many.

LEVEL TWO – THE DUNGEON

Unlike Alec, some students were unable to drop my class if it was too challenging because I was also assigned to teach the lowest level of English, one for students who had so many academic or behavioral struggles in middle school that they were literally put in the basement with an occasional roach scuttling across the floor. The "dungeon,"

as these selected students dubbed it, would be a lower level of my allegorical inferno than the aforementioned classroom. These students were the most racially and behaviorally diverse group in the school. Some had witnessed traumas before the age of fourteen that I, to this day, cannot fathom, but I was of the belief that “the immediate demands of physical, social, economic, and political life are not to influence what occurs in school” (Schiro, 2013, p. 23). All I could see was a group of students who could not care less about the curriculum I presented, which I took personally.

If a student cussed me or tried to flee the school, I never stopped to consider why; I saw it as disturbing the learning environment of everyone else. In that period of my life, I sought to protect the curriculum at all costs. Moreover, I desired to control the curriculum, especially for these students. If one of my students on a third grade reading level could not comprehend *The Odyssey*, how could I trust him/her with choice in the curriculum? Looking back, I was teaching in a school that allowed a decent amount of freedom for curriculum-making, but instead of altering it based on individual interests, I made it all about my own ideology.

I can see so many of these students in the “dungeon” clearly in my mind because they are some of the ones I keep in contact with the most. Since I taught in another school in the area, some of these students have provided me exemplary customer service and been the most excited to tell me about their lives. Former students of this “intervention” program are now caring parents, chefs, and mechanics. I am impressed with their accomplishments and wish that my curriculum had contributed to them, yet I know that the former Scholar Academic ideology in me would think “those things not included in the academic disciplines are not worthy of being contained in the world of intellect or the world of knowledge” (Schiro, 2013, p. 25); however, those students did not take it personally that I held this ideology. Because of their socio-economic statuses, personal lives, educational struggles, and probably many other factors, they never believed themselves to be competent. My yearbook from my time there is filled with “I love you, but you gave a lot of work!” If I was a tortured soul in this level of hell, my “sin” would have been that my curriculum never gave these students the opportunity to feel that they were capable of learning it.

LEVEL THREE – THE ALMA MATER

I left this school to become more of a Scholar Academic teacher by obtaining a Master’s degree in my content area and gaining teaching experience at the college level; yet, I missed teaching high school and elected to return to the same one I graduated from in Tennessee. For those who describe their high school experience as “hell,” there is a far deeper level, possibly at the very center of the Earth, reserved for teachers who think it is a good idea to return to it as an employee. Every positive memory I had about my alma mater was shattered, but even worse was the fact that I became a product of an ideology that I do not personally support: Social Efficiency.

Describing this level of my “hell” would need little hyperbole. Imagine students writing entire essays in one ninety-minute period, only to sit in the same room and write another after it ends. Then, they get do the same “activity” for other subjects and return the next day for more! Some students would give up and use their test booklets as pillows (arguably plush in their thickness), while others were near tears as they knew they spent too much time outlining their ideas and could not possibly finish. I could always only stare at them, hoping for their products to reflect my teaching but knowing we were all just part of a political machine that only cared for “behavior that is learned, not content that is acquired” (Schiro, 2013, p. 59). Since these TN Ready

tests provided their own reading excerpts for students, the texts I taught were of little relevance. All that mattered was if my students could write, on command, what the state deemed a “proficient” essay. My former high school’s administration fully supported “Race to the Top,” causing my students and me to be part of the race whether we were willing to “run” or not (Schiro, 2013, p. 82).

All professional learning team meetings, professional development days, and content of administrators’ feedback revolved around data. TN Ready had determined “the needs of society,” which were for students to be proficient in all subjects (Schiro, 2013, p. 5). Since proficiency was all that mattered, it was up to teachers to “gradually lead the learner from incompetence to competence” (Schiro, 2013, p. 61). I was expected to give an in-class essay every week to my ninth graders for the duration of Unit 1, then decrease the amount *only* when their skills improved. When teachers attempted to tactfully describe the hell their classrooms had become for the students as well as themselves (having to grade over 100 bland, rushed papers a week), the administration explained that they were using “scientific instrumentalism” to determine the curriculum (Schiro, 2013, p. 68). Teachers were attempting to argue against data they rarely understood with pathos, causing them to teach “mandated objectives” whether they agreed with them or not (Schiro, 2013, p. 83).

At one point, I considered the adage, “If you can’t beat them, join them.” My attempts at developing a curriculum that students could enjoy could not generate administrator buy-in the way the “programmed curriculum” that the State provided did (Schiro, 2013, p. 60). If I remarked that the students loathed an assignment, I was met with, “Oh, they don’t hate it too much.” If I explained that students could barely comprehend a text because we were encouraged to teach select chapters or scenes, I was told, “They can look it up on their own if they want.” Clearly, “skills” [were] more important than acquiring an “understanding” (Schiro, 2013, p. 85). This job forced upon me the ideology that a “teacher’s job is to supervise student work” and to make sure the work meets standards, not consider what they enjoy or spark creativity (Schiro, 2013, p. 93).

There would be a corner in this level of the Educator Inferno meant for Tribe Time Tutoring. If students did not meet standards, they were required to come to tutoring during half of their designated hour-long lunch period to work on the skills they lacked on their most recent essay. Lily, a creative, imaginative student who read Juliet’s lines in our play like she was part of the original cast, once had to come to tutoring everyday for a full week because she could still not write an adequate topic sentence. She had examples, my help, and time designated during the school day, but she could not get past the “cognitive stage” to finally reach the “automatic stage,” where she would, according to the State, write topic sentences on command without stopping to consider their purpose (Schiro, 2013, p. 62). “It makes my paper sound like someone else wrote it,” she explained to me. Perhaps Lily did not want to be bound by the standard essay format of high school that is dissuaded by the college level, but in this ideology, “If a student makes a mistake, he or she is not allowed to continue until the mistake is corrected” (Schiro, 2013, p. 60). Lily could not be “freed” until she got it right. Personally, I desired nothing more than for Lily’s paper to sound like her; however, I was working under a school’s ideology where “curriculum standards reflect the educational aspirations of the taxpayers” (Schiro, 2013, p. 83). I could give her a higher grade and exempt her from Tribe Time Tutoring, but the State would ultimately mark her down.

Those years teaching under a Social Efficiency ideology were the lowest point

in my teaching career. I could no longer provide authentic feedback because “learning [consisted] of a change or leaner behavior that [could] be easily assessed by standardized tests” (Schiro, 2013, p. 83). Everything was about that test and the skills it was evaluating. Though I had students I was close to, we rarely bonded the way I did with my young, Scholar Academic followers in my first job. I truly was working in a factory where

The child is the raw material. The adult is the finished product. The teacher is an operative, or factory worker. The curriculum is whatever processing the raw material (the child) needs to change him into the finished product (the desired adult). (Schiro, 2013, p. 65)

Students were polite to me, but none came by outside of class time unless they were assigned tutoring. My students learned in my class, at least according to this ideology, but I am certain some would not even remember my name. After all, if I was teaching the way this ideology envisioned, would I not be interchangeable with any other competent person?

OUT OF THE INFERNO

In a hero’s journey, the underworld reflects a rebirth, which is what happened midway through teaching in Tennessee. I had high test scores and the respect of the administration, but neither I nor my students enjoyed being in my classroom much. A “fun day” for them was getting to listen to music while they worked individually. After completing my Ed.S. and realizing that a Social Efficiency ideology will not produce 21st century learners who will be prepared for the job market, I made a conscious decision to alter my classroom even though the school would not follow (Zhao, 2012).

My new Learner Centered ideology felt like a heaven that even John Dewey would be proud of. I began to see that “people contain their own capabilities for growth,” causing me to put far more power in student choice (Schiro, 2013, p. 5). Though I was still “in charge” of determining the curriculum units and there were clear rules for conduct and formatting, students worked in collaborative learning groups almost daily where I could sit back and listen (Schiro, 2013, p. 121). I found that I no longer felt I had to be the “expert” on anything. Instead, my “meaning-making organisms” were encouraged to find information that the rest of the class (including myself) was unaware of, then enlighten us in their writing, presentations, and projects (Schiro, 2013, p. 133). I began to know their interests, which helped me suggest ways to tackle an assignment. Each student became “a *person* within the classroom rather than a paragon” (Schiro, 2013, p. 140).

Valerie was an incredibly gifted student but had a helicopter parent who smothered her with responsibility. She told me during the first week of class that she probably would not meet deadlines, and if I had my former Scholar Academic ideology, I more than likely would have encouraged her to drop. But, with my new ideology emphasizing that “children contain within themselves their own capabilities for growth,” it became up to Valerie to “activate [her] capabilities through [her] own efforts” (Schiro, 2013, p. 133). She began to show more interest in our Shakespeare unit, where she not only read several roles, but told me she read the parts the night before (which was not homework) so that she could “read the lines correctly.” This interest in the text expanded to an interest in Elizabethan fashion, resulting in Valerie spearheading a project that contained details I would have never stumbled upon with

my limited time for each topic. Then, in the discussion-based seminar assessment, she focused on the characters' references to clothes as a critique on class, gender, and emotional stability. All of Valerie's growth came from me preparing "experiential environments that engage children and challenge them to learn and make personal meanings" instead of standing in front of the class and imparting my knowledge (Schiro, 2013, p. 130).

I also relinquished my control over the texts we read, preferring to be a "facilitator of learning" (Schiro, 2013, p. 137). Instead of "going over" chapters of a book together and pointing out the important areas, students were placed in "Literary Theory" book clubs where each member read chapters from a lens of a different theory. Then, in class, they discussed their findings. With this curriculum, students were able to "make meaning and construct knowledge through the continuous reconstruction of their existing meanings" (Schiro, 2013, p. 130). There was palpable excitement in the air as students pulled out their notes on the readings, unlike when I gave comprehension quizzes. Now, the students could pull in personal examples, change their opinions, and make predictions based on their readings. Once, a "C" turned "B" average student named Sophia told me, "I just wish we had this class for longer. Our group goes so deep with the discussion, and we could just keep going." Keep in mind, the class was a ninety-minute "block," and they usually were given the full time to discuss. I later found out that "Group Chats" had been made to continue the discussions, and students even emailed me some of the highlights.

It is interesting that this "heaven" came from being "not simply an imparter of information, but a facilitator of...growth, learning, meaning-making, development, and self-actualization" when I was so sure that the Scholar Academic ideology was what a "real teacher" was (Schiro, 2013, p. 104). As I gave up the forceful control of the curriculum, I was able to provide more "individual attention" (Schiro, 2013, p. 104). Students started to see that they had "the right to direct their own learning," causing the effort they put into their work to dramatically increase overall (Schiro, 2013, p. 102). I began planning field trips, buying props for students to act out the plays, and my room held more art supplies than TN Ready booklets. I was finally happy because my classroom had become more of an enjoyable place "where people develop naturally according to their own innate natures" (Schiro, 2013, p. 5). But, the best part was: I got to learn with them.

THE JOURNEY TOWARD PARADISE CONTINUES

Is my journey at its end? Have I escaped the Educator Inferno reborn to exist in a paradise? Perhaps this ideology was my heaven. I can imagine John Dewey's approving nod as he sits in the back of my learner-centered classroom, twisting his mustache and pushing his glasses further up to fully see my students' self-directed learning. I can hear current and former students tell me, "You're my favorite teacher." "This class is the best part of my day!" I can read the emails and messages on social media from them recalling positive memories and telling me they had new thoughts on what they read in my class. But, instead of basking in it, I want to tell them all: I still have *so much* to learn. I still have *so much* that I fear.

Social Reconstruction is an ideology that is tucked away in my head, sometimes emerging, but never fully present. I have never desired to adopt a Social Reconstruction ideology to the extent of believing that "the purpose of education is to facilitate the construction of a new and more just society that offers maximum satisfaction to all of its members" (Schiro, 2013, p. 6). Yes, society could be improved,

but I have never necessarily thought I would be the one to change it in a significant way. Until this point in my career, my “intent of teaching” was not to “reconstruct society” (Schiro, 2013, p. 182). After all, as a public school teacher, what parents/guardians dictated was law, so do “educators have the right to attempt to change the social patterns of a culture without the permission of its members?” (Schiro, 2013, p. 170). But, when I imagine the possibilities of a more inclusive, eco-based, meaningful curriculum with me serving as a “colleague or companion whom students can look up to rather than an authority who has control over them,” it feels like that might really be the “paradise” I keep striving for (Schiro, 2013, p. 187). Perhaps, I am still on my journey after all.

References

- Alighieri, D. (1980). *Inferno: A verse translation with an introduction by Allen Mandelbaum*. Bantam Books.
- Lavoie, R. (1989). *Developing an educational philosophy: If you don't stand up for something, you'll fall for almost anything*. Retrieved from <https://www.ricklavoie.com/philosophy.html>
- Schiro, M. (2013). *Curriculum theory: Conflicting visions and enduring concerns*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Zhao, Y. (2012). *World class learners: Educating creative and entrepreneurial students*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.