

THE CURRICULUM OF GRAVITY

HOW TEACHERS CAN HARNESS STRUGGLE

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Today is June 23, 2025. It is my 47th birthday. Actually, to honor my family's precocious linguaphilia, I should say it is my 48th birthday, on which I am turning 47 years old. Or to be really pedantic, it is the 47th anniversary of my birth.

I start here for two equally important reasons. First, I am old enough now that I have lived through some things. I aim in this piece to suggest that it is in the moments in which we rise above that which attempts to drag us under we really find our mettle. I have had many of those moments. Second, it is crucial to understand, I think, that I was raised by men and women of great—but playful—intellect. And at the same time, I was raised to understand, perhaps, that such a trait was just the result of a tremendous stroke of luck—the throw of a dart into cosmic dartboard of many different (and equally notable) bullseyes.

This piece is really a letter to teachers, my comrades in one of the most important endeavors our species has ever undertaken. I am going to make a gutsy guess that, like me, you were probably good at school—at least some aspects of it. And it certainly makes sense to say that, in order to teach students to *be good students*, being good at doing school is not an irrelevant qualification. Yet, education is an underpinning of the human experience and far too large to define in simple reductions. Of course, Labaree (1997) knew that when he attempted to find workable purposes of education. Biesta (2009) surely understood that it is more than a set of justifications. Education is a set of working tools people use to carve themselves out of the rock of our imperfect origins—to make something true and beautiful out of our existence, however we define “true” or “beautiful” or “existence.”

But as it is, if we really examine ourselves and our practices, is that what we are really prioritizing? How often do we teach our students *how* to carve themselves while holding a narrow vision of *what* they can carve? We regale ourselves with notions that we are “making a difference” and “creating a better world” while also keeping a death grip on traditions that are probably keeping those lovely ambitions well at bay. We hope to liberate our students while still paying homage to oppressive forms (see Darder, 2018; Freire, 1968/1996; Stovall, 2018). We are leaving so much potential behind as we march in such reverent step with our own experiences, ignoring those of our students. This is especially true if we are not from backgrounds that have experienced the oppressive weight of the system.

The incomparable bell hooks (1996) reminds us, powerfully, that “the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy” (p. 126). To truly transform education, we must learn to harness the thousands of tiny victories our students make every day and empower them to see the immense and wonderful carving that lies inside of each of them. What follows is a plea. Recognize this: the *weight of the system* hits us all differently. The gravity exerted on us could be vastly incongruous to that which is exerted on our colleagues, our students, or our fellows in the human struggle. This is a curriculum for that challenge—the curriculum of gravity.



PART 1: HOW SHRIMPING TAUGHT ME THE IMPACT OF A TEACHER'S WORDS

I suppose I have to start pretty far back. There was always just an expectation in my household that I would be a good student. There was never a question that I would buckle down and do the work. But my parents also put forth a keen preclusion that we (my brother and I) would not be arrogant or boastful about our abilities or intellectual prowess—of which he had far more than I. My father especially seemed concerned with humbling us and teaching us that being smart kids didn't give us license to treat people with disrespect or, worse, to be prideful or think we were above our classmates and peers. Years later, in a conversation around my qualification as a National Merit Scholar, he said to me, "Being that smart can be very lonely if you let it be." At 16 or 17, I had no idea what he meant.

Some context is probably useful. My father is a very intelligent man in his own right. I can think of many tremendous ways he has influenced my thinking and challenged me. And often, he was insistent that I chose a humble path. He would remind me to use common language, for example, because anything else was just "being a peacock." He would say, "One should only use the word utilize when one can't use the word use." But he would also keep us above the groundlings by such reminders as "Nothing can be 'very very.' One 'very' will suffice." I wouldn't understand until much later on that the world would give me, a white boy, far more latitude and grace in how I wielded language. My vocabulary was a form of capital, and I could use it to fit into all manner of groups, from the most erudite to the most "common" (see Yosso, 2005).

To understand my dad, I think you have to back up even more. My grandfather was an eminent archaeologist in the Southwestern United States. If you read nearly any book on pre-Columbian culture in the four-corners region of the U.S., he's cited in there. He gave more lectures and published more surveys on Chaco Canyon than probably any contemporary during his time on Earth. To this day, his name is spoken with respect in places like Mesa Verde National Park and Bandolier National Monument. And yet, through all of that, he carried the self-ascribed moniker of "The Last of the Illiterate Archaeologists."

He would say this because, although he was greatly accomplished, successful, and well-respected, he built that career with only a bachelor's degree. I heard countless stories of how he battled the onslaught of people from "fancy colleges back east" who had PhDs but "couldn't conjugate a goddamn verb." This was the man who raised the man who raised me, and this really set the tone in my household. Learning was important, but true erudition was knowing that the common man was due far more respect than they were paid by "the learned."

And I share all of this for a simple reason. These lessons *did not take*. At all. By the time I had reached high school, I was arrogant and convinced that I was smarter than nearly everyone I came across in life. Sure, all teenagers think they know everything. Sure, they are often loud and wrong. But I was certain I *did* know everything.

Fast forward to 2014 or 2015. I had been teaching high school theatre for nearly a decade. I poured myself into my work, trying to help disadvantaged youth (whatever that means) create meaningful, powerful theatre. I wanted them to understand that they had power to really change the world by telling their stories and *making* people see them. I believed in them and wanted them to believe in themselves. Sounds great, right? But I was also quick to show my frustration. I was hard on them, and I taught them to be hard on themselves. I was not happy with the progress my actors were making, and I let them know every chance I could. After all, I had high expectations of myself, as teachers were taught to have (Lemon, 2021), and I was exceeding my own expectations. Why couldn't they exceed theirs?



But outside of school, I was engaged in a new obsession of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu (BJJ). I am not overstating this. I was *terrible*. Each class, I would arrive early to get some extra stretching time and to possibly get some extra time with one of the coaches, who were usually there for that purpose. Class would start, and though we would often work on new techniques, we would also spend a considerable amount of time on my Achilles heel: Shrimping.

Shrimping is a technique in BJJ when you scoot along the floor, backwards, hinging around your hips while using your legs as propulsion. In grappling, this is theoretically a way of escaping an attacker who seeks to control you from the top position. The shape you form in the mid-point of this move is much like a shrimp, hence the name. Try as I might, I simply could not shrimp. Not even a little bit.

I would notice that my classmates picked things up with ease. It was as if they were secretly meeting for special class sessions without me to master techniques and to humiliate me. For the first time in my life, I was the worst student in the class, and not by a little bit. I was the worst *by far*.

While driving home from one particularly disastrous BJJ class, drenched in sweat, my mind went back to thinking of the things I was taught about humility. I thought about how, though not like BJJ, theatre is hard. Storytelling is hard. And digging down into our core to find the place where *good* storytelling comes from, that's practically impossible—especially for 15-17 year-old kids. As much as I wanted them to meet me where I was, my job was to do the exact opposite. My words were not received as encouragement. They rang to them the way shrimping did to me, as “You are not enough.” But they were enough—and I learned that, to really teach them, I had to honor that they came to me with so much more than I had previously believed. They were due far more respect that I was paying them with my “learning.” From that day forward, I never forgot that.

CURRICULUM OF GRAVITY AXIOM 1: THEIR GRAVITY, NOT OURS

In some ways, it's like I never grew past the arrogant youth who believed they knew everything. The effect of that was, quite simply, I was carrying a weight that was far too great for anyone—unrealistic expectations. I mean, sure, I *thought* I was meeting my own expectations. I thought I was exceeding them. But if I really think about it, my expectations of myself were to teach them to tell epic stories. And I certainly wasn't meeting that expectation, so long as it was framed in my definition of “epic.”

I learned the distinction, though it sounds like such a “duh” moment, between *my gravity* and *theirs*. I had two theatre degrees and a lot more life experience. The task I was asking of them was a warmup to me. But to them, it was *The Odyssey*. My whole approach changed when I realized that. I started asking questions like, “What story do *you* want to tell?” I asked, “How do you want to tell it?” And I let them go.

I let them take risks and make it theirs. It wasn't always good. Sometimes, it wasn't even coherent. But I let them shrimp their way through the process. I let them struggle with the weight of their own experience—and the *additional* weight that it may not be received as they intend. And the *additional* weight that, if it wasn't, they would have to go back to the beginning, retool, and carve anew. And the *additional* weight still of the prospect that no amount of crafting and skill might *ever* make it palatable for some people. That is a lesson worth learning! That is a moment of opportunity for a teacher. I was listening to what Palmer (1998) calls our “inner teacher” (p.



33). I was letting that voice that guided me to this work *actually guide my work*. And in the process, I was teaching them that they could wrestle indefinitely with their own inner self—and that they could rise above that which seeks to pull us down—whether that’s an unappreciative audience, an unfeeling teacher, or just a life of hardship. They were learning to overcome *their gravity*, and that is a beautiful thing—all thanks to Brazilian Jiu Jitsu and how fantastically bad at it I was. I am forever grateful for that lesson.

PART 2: “SUPERMAN CHEST” (OR, A POSSIBLE FUTURE)

Garages can get really cold in the dead of winter, especially when they are detached from the main house. This typically isn’t too big of a problem when you enter just to get in your car and go off on your daily routine. But there is no car in this garage. Not that, at times, I wouldn’t like there to be. It’s just that it’s tough to fit a car in there with 62 boxes of Halloween decorations, 45 of Christmas decorations, and 80 boxes just marked “crafting.”

Okay, so it’s not just *her* stuff in there. Fair. One half of the garage holds a squat rack, 5 or 6 different barbells, kettlebells, dumbbells, and about 600 pounds of iron plates. This garage is a bona fide black-iron gym. And when it’s winter—like, dark at 8:00am winter—it’s cold. The barbells are always torture devices, but in this deep winter they will also take the skin right off your hands.

Still, I am here, because I need to get in my sets today. It’s a Wednesday. A de-load day if you’re fancy—a “light day” if you, like me, think that gives a bit more psychological oomph. On these days, I get to pull my squats back to what they were a week ago, and I only have 2 sets. It feels like cheating, but it keeps you moving forward. If we could add weight every session, we would all squat 5000 pounds. I am considerably far from that benchmark. It’s good that it’s a light day here. Because it’s never a light day at my job.

I can still remember my first day in the principal’s chair—so many eager pop-ins and handshakes, so many people sharing their excitement about my arrival. That felt good. But years on, it feels like my cold gym. Lonely, but necessary.

When I was working on my PhD, I read a lot by folk like Dr. Bettina Love and Dr. David Stovall who shared a stark, but somehow still beautiful, vision that, to really see an equitable, sustainable model of education, we would have to build it from the ground up. We would have to eschew all the discussion of reforms and call them out as the pipe dreams that they are. But I also recall the solemn reminder from one of my faculty who said that “we can’t just burn down the buildings and expect it all to just work.” But somehow I never let myself believe that our government would put public education on the executioner’s slab—even if the signs were all there. And, that’s exactly what they did just two years ago, when they outlawed public schools, except for State Training Academies, one of which I lead. The words of Assata Shakur (2020) ring in my head:

No one is going to give you the education you need to overthrow them. Nobody is going to teach you your true history, teach you your true heroes, if they know that that knowledge will help set you free. (p. 455)

I hate how prophetic her words have become, though. I hate the way I must now ply my work in secret—whispers and side glances and so much fear now a part of educating our children, which should be the greatest endeavor of the human experience. They took away not only



education that could inspire their overthrow—they also took away the spirit to look beyond the Curriculum Directorate’s official version of history. More than that, they took away any potential to see education as anything other than a sorting mechanism for the new American caste system. Abolition by the controlling interests of dominant narratives, and not at the hands of empowered communities, seeking to take back their human right to knowing.

Today, across the nation, we stand up. For months now, at my site, in secret and small moves, we’ve been doing the work Dr. Love taught us to do: Freedom Dreaming—collectively building a vision of what a just future looks like. We have been placing the humanity of our students at the center of what we do. We have included them in our decision-making and made small policy changes to center their diverse perspectives—without, of course, using any words from the Lexicon of Banned Words, such as “diversity” or “equity.” We are focusing on creating nurturing environments and strong relationships where our students feel safe to explore their motivations and passions. We are seeking the knowledge and culture of our community and integrating them into every possible part of our curriculum and culture. We are supporting the wellness of our teachers—now villainized as enemies to the Directorate. We are choosing to see this moment as a gift and to take back our power as educators and as citizens. This, I believe, is what Dr. Love envisioned.

This is hard, though. Eyes are everywhere. Whispers are everywhere. Admonishments and proclamations criminalize any mention of identity or beliefs that are perceived as counter to the Directorate. New ways of sharing truths always lead to new edicts. The reality is, they are battling to contain the Zeitgeist, but they are losing. I will always work to see to that—just as so many of my fellows do too, here in our cold garages.

When we teach a new lifter to deadlift, we wish we could simply load up 500 pounds and have them stand it up. But of course, we cannot. Instead, we load up incremental amounts, small moves just like at work, and remind them to pull their chest up like Superman, set their back tight, and stand UP.

CURRICULUM OF GRAVITY AXIOM 2 – WE GET STRONGER, THE WEIGHT DOESN’T GET LIGHTER

So, maybe this story is extreme. I like to think I am not alone in praying it never comes to this. And yet, if it does, as much as we’d like to blame one ideology over another, it will really be the result of a thousand cuts—a thousand little times we saw the weight that needed lifting and simply thought we could not. Or worse, that it wasn’t ours to lift.

I’ve been a teacher for 20 years, even when my title said I was something else. In that time, I have been privileged to coach and mentor many new teachers into the craft. We can all remember those first years. So hard. So full of impossible battles. So much weight. But also, it’s the time of our greatest growth. Those who lift weights for sport, or health, or mental acuity, or just sheer zaniness will tell you that you never seem to get as strong, as fast, as when you first start. An exercise physiologist could explain to you why this is and could use fancy terms like homeostasis to do so—but basically, it’s because we don’t really grow stronger from lifting the weight. We grow stronger from *recovering from lifting the weight*. In those first few years of teaching, we are lifting the weights of time management, self-care, behavior challenges, pedagogy, curriculum, committee assignments, difficult team members, unrealistic administrative expectations, parent phone calls, rushes to the IMC to make copies, ad infinitum. But we are also reflecting on all of



those things in an almost constant loop of recovery. “I made it through that day. What went well? What did not?” Rep after rep, we get stronger.

And then, somewhere along the way, we turn on autopilot. We know how to manage our time reasonably well. We know how to get done what needs to get done. We are busy. We are tired. We want to go home.

These are the days when new weights emerge—and my experience has shown me that getting teachers to lift them is very, very (sorry, Dad—it’s appropriate here) hard to do. These are weights like redesigning curriculum, creating realistic assessment goals, advocating for teachers in opposition of dismissive school boards and principals, hunting resources, calling legislators, fighting disinformation, ad infinitum part two. And the recovery time for lifting those weights is astronomical. Our daily reflection becomes, “Why am I here? Why do I do this? Janice went to work for a credit card processor and makes twice my salary.”

No one can blame teachers for leaving, not with any real merit to their argument. But take a step back and imagine yourself where you are right now. Think of the weights that are being presented to you. You couldn’t even begin to think of lifting those weights when you started teaching. And now, you are in control. You are choosing to let that weight lie, not because you can’t lift it but because you choose not to. And if that’s your choice, *I respect that!* There is no shame. You are enough. But if you are willing to try, you can lift them, and we can all be there together to help and recover.

PART 3: HOW SCIATICA NEARLY SUNK ME (AND MAYBE, GAVE ME MY LIFE BACK)

When I was young and loud and the full possibilities of life were still within my reach, I tended to lead my way through life with swagger of what I called non-conformity. That basically meant that I dressed and acted the same as everyone else in my crew, and we dressed and acted the same as people we emulated at punk rock shows in Phoenix. I think one could say that, quite literally, we were conforming. Aside from that, though, I loved a good irreverent joke. And one of my favorite was to pretend I was old (which I now know was a foolish quantifier) and exclaim “My sciatica!” I thought it sounded funny and that it sounded like something I had heard elderly people say. We would all laugh, the joke ostensibly being that we were not, in fact, old—and maybe that old people were worth laughing at.

Karma is, as they say, kind of mean.

You may recall, I learned a lot from my brief foray into the endeavor of becoming a jiu-jiteiro. It taught me a lot about how our students struggle—something I had been (almost arrogantly) ignorant of. But it left another unfortunate souvenir as well—a ruptured disc in the L4/L5 joint of my spine. And on an off for the last 10 years, that injury gave me my penance for my irreverence in youth in the form of, you guessed it, sciatica. Mild and intermittent though it was, I still spent many an afternoon on my back, nursing the pain. Somehow, that changed six months ago.

One of the really fun parts of aging, I find, is that almost inconsequential acts can cause significant bodily harm. I once, quite literally, hurt my back while making a sandwich. A few weeks before Christmas, I was preparing to travel back to Arizona, which I had done several times over a period of a few months, in order to help my dad, who was in skilled nursing care. I was excited. This would be my last trip for a while, because he would be coming back to live near me, in Oxford, Ohio. As I packed, probably overly distracted realizing I didn’t have to fly again for a



while, I stooped to get something from the floor when I felt a pop in my back. Oops. Seering pain came roaring back into my life. I had erred, and I had erred greatly.

By the time I started the Spring 2025 semester (just 6 months ago as I write this), I was using a cane to walk. And “walk” is not really an apt descriptor of what I could do. I hobbled, and not very well at that. I couldn’t stand either. Nor could I sit, lay, or any hybrid where I didn’t feel intense pain unlike anything I had ever felt. Even sleep was impossible. It was a dark start to the semester, and not even teaching—something that has brought me immeasurable joy in my life—could alleviate that darkness.

Through this all, I was pouring myself into my academic work. Passing comps (comprehensive exams) felt like something I *could* control. Likewise, getting my dissertation proposal accepted was at least something to keep pushing for, even if I couldn’t really live how I wanted to. And I am grateful that I put in that effort, because it might be what led me to my current salvation. It was something to keep striving for. It was a light at the end of a tunnel, and even if I didn’t emerge from that tunnel walking, I *would* emerge with something to show for it. I would have a PhD. And though it never really seemed that important to me before, I most definitely would wear the honorific of doctor with pride.

That small change in mindset brings me to where I am right now. I found new resolve to fight and started training with barbells again. If I could work as hard as I have to keep my brain strong, I wanted to echo that in my body. As I write this, I live mostly pain free, and I feel recharged for the rest of my journey—an outcome that most certainly would not have come from collapsing into my pain and choosing to let it win.

Struggle, and our determination to take incremental steps to overcome it, are a core component of education. And yet, I am continually learning and re-learning the lesson that, when we, as educators, disconnect from our own struggles, we are not connected to the human reality of our students. Struggling to learn jiu jitsu showed me what it was like to not easily understand learning tasks—maybe for the first time in my life. Dealing with the seemingly impenetrable darkness of a disability, and the prospect that it may be forever, showed me that our obstacles will try very hard to define us. And, if we stop pushing against them, or seeing ways over them, through them, or by them, we accept that definition. Pushing through my academic tasks, and turning in work that I am proud of, showed me that we are capable of so much more than we believe we are.

Combined, aren’t these powerful lessons that should guide how we teach our students? Should it not be our pedagogy to acknowledge that we grow through these struggles? Because, they won’t go away, and they certainly won’t empower us unless we dig deep to find the gems that lie within.

CURRICULUM OF GRAVITY AXIOM 3 – WE STRUGGLE, WE LIFT, WE RECOVER, WE GROW

If I haven’t completely lost you, which is a distinct possibility, consider a simple scenario. A veteran teacher, Mrs. Ronnie, feels that her students’ writing progress is waning (*weight*). Five years ago, she loved when district benchmark data would arrive—they were always a big ego boost. Today, she’d rather avoid it altogether. Still, she takes a deep breath, and though she really should finish planning next week’s unit on assertive topic sentences, she opens the email with her results (*struggle*). These results are not good (*weight*). She does not shy away and keeps reading (*struggle*). She thinks deeply about what they mean (*struggle*). A clear picture emerges: They



aren't getting it. What she's been doing for so long now, it's not effective with these students (*weight*).

Well, maybe she hasn't really been focused (*weight*). Life has been hard lately (*weight*). She has a thought, and she immediately hates it (*struggle*). Then she hates that she hates it—why is she so stubborn (*weight*)? She needs help (*struggle*). She has to talk to Ms. Summers, the 26-year-old, ever-chipper, ever-jubilant 4th year teacher who loves talking about curriculum and pedagogy (*struggle*). Ms. Summers says she has the answer (*struggle*). “Differentiation and peer-review centers!” (*struggle*). Ms. Summers gives her a book. It has a cute title like “Power to the Writer!” (*weight*). But she cracks it open (*struggle*). She reads (*struggle*), reads some more (*struggle*), and reads until she realizes she actually likes the book and its ideas. She thinks, “this could work, but it means rearranging everything” (*weight*). But she puts her head down and gets to work (*struggle*).

Now we cut to Amaya. Amaya is 13 years old and hates Language Arts. She used to love writing and telling stories. People even told her she's good at it. Now, people rarely tell her she's good at things (*weight*). And, since she had to quit the volleyball team, the only thing she liked, to get home in time for mom to get to work (*weight*), she doesn't really want to even come to school. And it's so much worse this year with Mrs. Ronnie as her Language Arts teacher. All she does is tell Amaya she doesn't write “correctly” (*weight*).

But today she gets to class, and it looks different (*struggle, weight*). Something new (*struggle*). She doesn't like new (*struggle*). She casts a sharp-eyed gaze to Mrs. Ronnie, standing at the front of the class with a stupid smile on her face. Oh, no. Mrs. Ronnie is about to say something to her (*weight*). Teachers are so cringe. “Amaya, I am so glad to see you. You're such a good writer, and I think you're really going to like class from now on.”

Together, over the next several weeks, Mrs. Ronnie and Amaya carry the weight of these changes. Mrs. Ronnie helps Amaya lift the weight of telling her story. Amaya helps Mrs. Ronnie lift the weight of letting go of some of the structures she has always been told are doctrine. Mrs. Ronnie also works with Ms. Summers to lift the weight of how to land this amidst the measurement-obsessed educational environment they work in. Mrs. Ronnie sees Amaya grow (*recovery*). Amaya feels herself loving to write again (*recovery*).

Is this idyllic? Absolutely. But I am asking you to consider the alternative? The weights were already there in Mrs. Ronnie's life. They were certainly there in Amaya's. Choosing not to struggle (or not knowing how to struggle) to lift those weights wasn't leading to anywhere good. But now, there is hope in Mrs. Ronnie's classroom again (*growth*). That, my comrades, is the power of gravity.

PART 4: THE WRONG TURNS, THE STUMBLES AND FALLS ...

There is a line in a song called “The Luckiest,” by Ben Folds. It goes, “I know all the wrong turns, the stumbles and falls brought me here.” I think about this line a lot—more frequently, lately, as I wonder what exactly I've gotten myself into pursuing a PhD at almost 50. Every once in a while, I will say that I am just doing it to open some doors. I'm told it's still a pretty auspicious title, after all. But when I say this, I am reminded that I am not a credentialist.

At least, I am not a “credentialist” in this way: I don't believe a credential makes anyone better, or smarter, or more capable, or more right. And yet, I am probably a credentialist in one significant way. I believe that our life, as the collection of how we rise against challenges, as the



transcript of how we have treated others, as the artifact of what we have carved out of that rock of our imperfect origins, is worth hanging on the wall. It's worth stopping from time to time and saying, "You see that weight over there? I lifted that."

I am gob smacked, time and time again, by people who wish to downplay their own footprints—even though there are so many others who are willing to do that for us. As teachers, we face an ever-present tide of voices that wish to paint us in negative ways. They seek to tell us that we couldn't do, so we teach. They shout that we were "the dumbest students at the dumbest colleges." And yet, we persist against a gravity that most could not fathom—the of leading other human beings to light. Everything you are, and everything you have been through, has prepared you to lift that weight. You just have to believe you can.

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