



# **In the Heart of Edu-Babble**

One Week in the Life of  
a Graduate Education Student

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**Michael Zwaagstra  
and Rodney Clifton**

## About the authors



**Michael Zwaagstra** is a public high school teacher, education researcher and author. He has extensive teaching experience at a variety of grade levels and currently teaches high school social studies in Manitoba. He received his Bachelor of Education, Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in Education and Master of Education degrees from the University of Manitoba where he won numerous academic awards including the A.W. Hogg Undergraduate Scholarship, the Klieforth Prize in American History and the Schoolmasters' Wives Association Scholarship. As an educator, Zwaagstra is a strong proponent of raising academic standards, holding schools accountable for their results and expanding the educational options available to parents. He conducts policy research on education issues for the Frontier Centre for Public Policy and the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies. His research has addressed topics such as standardized testing, teaching methodologies, assessment, school choice and teachers' unions. His columns promoting common-sense education reforms have been published in major daily newspapers including the *National Post*, *The Globe and Mail*, *The Province*, the *Calgary Herald*, the *Winnipeg Free Press* and *The Chronicle Herald*. At the 2013 Canadian Community Newspaper Awards, Zwaagstra received second place in the Outstanding Columnist category. He is a frequent guest on radio and television stations across the country. His first book, *What's Wrong with Our Schools and How We Can Fix Them* (co-authored with Rodney A. Clifton and John C. Long), was published in 2010. *What's Wrong with Our Schools* ignited debate on education reform across the country in school staff rooms, newspapers and university campuses. Zwaagstra also has experience as an elected official. In 2006, he was elected to the Steinbach City Council. He was re-elected in 2010 and appointed to the position of Deputy Mayor in 2012. His community involvement includes serving on several boards, writing a weekly column for his local paper and teaching adult classes in his church.



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# Executive Summary

- Anyone who wishes to become a teacher in Canada must hold a valid teaching certificate. In order to qualify for a teaching certificate, prospective teachers must complete a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree from a recognized institution.
- Despite their position of influence, education schools have come under withering criticism from their own graduates and are generally held in low repute by other university faculties.
- Many education schools are criticized for their weak academic standards, irrelevant courses, poorly conducted research, and one-sided indoctrination. No other university department has come under this level of sustained assault from insiders and outsiders alike.
- Critics of education schools generally focus on a broad overview of the key problems. To gather their information, they normally visit many different colleges or faculties of education, sit in on different courses, and interview a large number of students and professors.
- In contrast, this report provides a comprehensive description and analysis of one graduate-level educational foundations course at a Canadian university.
- Based on the detailed notes and observations made by a graduate education student who successfully completed this course, this report gives readers a direct window into the content and context in a Canadian education course at the graduate level.
- The education foundations course described in this report confirms the serious problems other writers have identified with education schools.
- In this course, students spent more time “naval gazing” and discussing irrelevant issues than actually engaging with the hard work of studying effective ways of teaching and learning. Instead of exposing students to a wide variety of views and perspectives, the professor chose to assign one-sided video clips and articles that more closely resembled environmentalist propaganda than serious academic research.
- If anything, students who completed this course will become worse teachers if they actually incorporate the edu-babble they learned into their teaching practices.
- Universities need to review the courses offered by their education schools and ensure they meet the necessary academic standards. Courses filled with meaningless edu-babble and simplistic assignments need to be substantially revised or dropped altogether.
- Provincial governments should take a hard look at teacher certification requirements and the teacher pay scales found in collective agreements. Instead of giving automatic raises for completing a series of useless education courses, pay increases should instead be linked to performance in the classroom.
- Until education schools in Canada are forced to eliminate the edu-babble and offer

academically rigorous training, they will continue to be held in low esteem by other university departments and the general public.

## Introduction

Anyone who wishes to become a teacher in Canada must hold a valid teaching certificate. In order to qualify for a teaching certificate, prospective teachers must complete a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree from a recognized institution. The only way to get a B.Ed. is to attend an education school, normally referred to as a Faculty (School or College) of Education.

Since education schools hold a monopoly over teacher education, their impact on public education is significant. However, despite their position of influence, many education schools have come under withering criticism from their own graduates and are generally held in low repute by other university faculties.

Some of the most scathing critiques of American education schools have been written by James Koerner, Rita Kramer, E.D. Hirsch, Jr., Heather Mac Donald, David Larabee, Arthur Levine, and George Cunningham. Education schools are criticized for their weak academic standards, irrelevant courses, poorly conducted research, and one-sided indoctrination. No other university department has come under this level of sustained assault from insiders and outsiders alike.

While Canadian education schools operate in a somewhat different political context, the reality is that education schools in Canada are heavily influenced by those in the United States. Many education professors in Canadian institutions received their doctorates from American colleges while the vast majority of textbooks, “research” journals, and other required readings used in Canadian courses were written by American education professors.

In the past, most critiques of education schools focused on a broad overview of their key problems. To gather data, critics visited many different schools, sat in on a number of classes, interviewed students and professors, and reviewed course catalogues from various institutions. This methodology has the advantage of providing a comprehensive analysis and makes it possible to compare education schools with each other. However, it is also limited in that critics generally spent only a limited amount of time in each school and sat in on only a small fraction of the instructional periods provided in each course.

In contrast, this report provides a comprehensive description and analysis of one graduate-level educational foundations course at a Canadian university. Based on the detailed notes and observations made by a graduate education student who successfully completed the course, this report gives readers a direct window into a Canadian education course at the graduate level. The course syllabus, required readings, assignments, lectures, and interactions with classmates form part of the description and analysis.

This student’s experience correlates well with the primary concerns raised about

education schools by the American critics mentioned above. In-depth immersion in the world of an education student serves to confirm the broader criticisms leveled against education schools by other writers.

***Based on the detailed notes and observations made by a graduate education student who successfully completed the course, this report gives readers a direct window into a Canadian education course at the graduate level.***

# Critiques of education schools

Criticism of education schools is nothing new. Back in 1933, the retiring president of Harvard University famously described Harvard's Graduate School of Education as a "kitten that ought to be drowned."<sup>1</sup> In 1954, *Time* magazine even dubbed 120th Street, (New York City), separating Columbia Teachers' College from the rest of Columbia University, as "the widest street in the world" because of the vast ideological chasm between the education school and other university departments.<sup>2</sup>

The most comprehensive critique of teacher education, *The Miseducation of American Teachers*, was written by James D. Koerner in 1963.<sup>3</sup> Over the course of more than 300 pages, Koerner systematically outlined the results of his visits to sixty-three education schools. As part of his investigation, Koerner reviewed course outlines, sat in on classes, interviewed professors, and administered student surveys. Koerner did not mince words when he described education course work as "puerile, dull, and ambiguous."<sup>4</sup>

When it came to graduate level courses, Koerner observed that they were "often weaker than the undergraduate, having atomized content even further."<sup>5</sup> Koerner found that most graduate education students did not understand proper research methodology, lacked an adequate knowledge base, and could not write at an acceptable level. As for those who received doctorates in education, they ranked "on the bottom of the graduate ranks of the universities."<sup>6</sup>

In the last chapter of his book, Koerner pokes fun at the jargon used by education professors, dubbing it "Educanto." He quotes from some commonly used education textbooks to demonstrate how they use complex words and phrases to describe simple concepts. According to Koerner, "Educanto" results from the desire of education professors to sound enlightened and knowledgeable:

Educanto is a serious phenomenon with many pernicious effects. It has a great deal to do with the condition of Education as an academic field, for it is both a symptom and a cause of poor academic health. It reflects the educationist's artificial drive to create a profession and has now become an accepted mark of professionalism among educationists. It masks a lack of thought, and in fact makes thought of any important kind extraordinarily difficult.<sup>7</sup>

Journalist Rita Kramer's 1991 book, *Ed School Follies: The Miseducation of America's Teachers*, documents her experiences visiting the campuses of 15 education schools.<sup>8</sup> Kramer was dismayed at the anti-intellectual attitude she found among most education students and their professors. Education classes were often infantile places where prospective teachers sang children's songs, repeated stock phrases, and shared their feelings. While education students wanted to change the world, Kramer noted that they did not seem very knowledgeable about the world as it exists now. Nor did this appear to concern them:

Everywhere, I found idealistic people eager to do good. And everywhere, I found them being told that the way to do good was to prepare themselves

to cure a sick society. To become therapists, as it were, specializing in the pathology of education. Almost nowhere did I find teachers of teachers whose emphasis was on the measurable learning of real knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

In his 1996 book, *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*, English professor E.D. Hirsch, Jr. launched a frontal assault against the dominant ideology found in education schools.<sup>10</sup> Romantic progressivism, also known as constructivism, downplays the importance of subject matter content and places more emphasis on the so-called process of learning. While some noted education professors in the early twentieth century, such as William Bagley, spoke out against this ideology and defended a more traditional emphasis on knowledge, romantic progressivism quickly became dominant in virtually every education school.<sup>11</sup>

As evidenced by his decision to title one of his chapters, "Critique of a Thoughtworld", Hirsch portrayed education schools as largely impervious to the research evidence supporting traditional education methodologies. Similar to Koerner, the last chapter of Hirsch's book translates the jargon prospective teachers must learn during their training.<sup>12</sup> While some of the phrases have changed since 1963, their vacuous nature has not.

Two years after Hirsch's book was published, Heather Mac Donald, a fellow with the Manhattan Institute, wrote a scathing indictment of education schools for *City Journal* entitled "Why Johnny's Teacher Can't Teach."<sup>13</sup> Mac Donald blasts education schools for their excessive "naval gazing" and their "anything but knowledge" approach to teaching. After visiting an education class at City College of New York, Mac Donald describes it as "a remarkable exercise in vacuousness."<sup>14</sup>

While the aforementioned critiques were written by education outsiders, education schools have also come under attack from within. In 2004, David Labaree, an education professor at Stanford University, wrote *The Trouble With Ed Schools*.<sup>15</sup> While Labaree partially excuses the failings of education schools by noting the unrealistic societal expectations placed upon them, he acknowledges that many of their problems are their own doing. In particular, the dominance of the romantic progressive ideology contributes to the lack of emphasis on academic content in education schools:

Progressivism, then, fills an important need for education professors by providing us with a rationale for focusing on the process we know rather than the content we don't. In turn, pedagogical content knowledge fills an important need for us by responding to the critique of progressivism as process-happy with an apparently new and distinctive form of expertise that incorporates both process and content.<sup>16</sup>

Arthur Levine, former president of Columbia Teachers' College, wrote a candid analysis of education schools in 2006 entitled *Educating School Teachers*.<sup>17</sup> While Levine is less harsh than other writers, he still acknowledges there are serious problems with the quality of instruction provided.

Today, the teacher education curriculum is a confusing patchwork. Academic instruction and clinical instruction are disconnected. Graduates are insufficiently prepared for the classroom. And research on teacher education is criticized by

the academic community for its low quality and is ignored by policy makers and practitioners.<sup>18</sup>

Another education insider, George Cunningham, recently wrote a critique of education schools in North Carolina.<sup>19</sup> With thirty years of experience as an education professor at the University of Louisville, Cunningham has plenty of knowledge about how education schools work. Like many other critics, he lays the blame for the poor education provided in education schools directly at the feet of the dominant romantic progressive ideology.

In short, the critiques of education schools tend to focus on several key points:

- 1) Education schools and the professors who teach in them are usually held in low regard by other university departments.
- 2) Academic standards in education courses are often low and grade inflation is common.
- 3) Education courses typically focus too much on the so-called process of learning and not enough on academic content.
- 4) Education schools are often largely dominated by the romantic progressive approach to teaching.

***While Labaree partially excuses the failings of education schools by noting the unrealistic societal expectations placed upon them, he acknowledges that many of their problems are their own doing.***

# An in-depth look at a graduate level education course

Critics of education schools generally focus on a broad overview of the key problems. To gather their information, they normally visit many education schools, sit in on a variety of courses, and interview a large number of students and professors. By collecting data from many sources, they ensure that their descriptions of education schools are representative of normal practice.

However, one limitation of the broad approach is that investigators usually spend only a short period of time in any particular course. Taking a course from beginning to end would provide a much deeper understanding of the life and intellectual challenges of an education student.

One of this report's authors, Michael Zwaagstra, recently completed a standard education foundations course offered in an education school at a Canadian university. His observations, together with the course syllabus and required readings, form the basis of this report's analysis.

The required readings consisted of approximately 25 journal articles, some of which appeared online while others were in the course textbook.<sup>20</sup> Due to the repetitive nature of the course, only the first five days are described below. Summaries of the discussions, assignments, and instructions from the professor are included. To protect the identities of the professor and students, pseudonyms are used and other identifying characteristics are altered.

## Day 1

Students quietly walked into the mid-sized classroom located on the second floor of the education building. Tables and chairs were initially set up in a U-shape but the professor was quick to re-arrange them into a square, presumably to facilitate dialogue. During her introduction, the professor expressed how excited she was to be teaching this course. She viewed it as a great opportunity to "continue the learning journey" she has been on. She also emphasized her desire to be more of a facilitator than a teacher of specific content.

The first activity consisted of pairing students up and having them introduce their partners to the rest of the group. During the introductions it was revealed that two students were currently in doctoral programs in education foundations while the remaining students were working on their masters' degrees. Almost everyone was a current, or former, classroom teacher.

Once the initial introductions were out of the way, the professor proceeded to describe the course. She began by reading a quotation that she had placed on the screen. No explanation was provided:

Thus to see Others not as ontologically given by as historically constituted would be to erode the exclusivist biases we so often ascribe to cultures, our own not least. Cultures may then be represented as zones of control or abandonment, of recollection and of forgetting, of force or of dependence, of exclusiveness or of sharing, all taking place in the global history that is our element.<sup>21</sup>

After reading this edu-babble, the professor then outlined the three main assignments that made up the course grade; there were to be no exams or tests. The first assignment was for each student to create a so-called “commonplace book” where they reflect on each of the assigned readings, summarize group discussions, and provide additional reflections. The professor stressed that students did not have to use prose and were also welcome to write poems or draw pictures. Before handing in the commonplace book on the last day, students were expected to submit a suggested grade.

The second assignment was a group assignment in which each of the three groups was to create a “critical ethnography” of three specific locations. According to the syllabus, everyone was expected to “undertake careful observation and analysis of the spatial, historical, and social contexts and everyday practices of these locations, as well as integrate into your analysis ways in which your own imbeddedness in culture and place affects the ways you see and understand these locations.” As with the previous assignment, this one was also to be submitted with a suggested grade.

The third assignment was entitled “Culture as Practice.” Students were expected to submit a 20-page paper, or an equivalent assignment in which they “imagine and articulate how we might contribute to cultural change.”

After she finished going through the syllabus, the professor then divided the students into three groups. Each group was to go through one of the assigned readings for the day and then lead a discussion with the rest of the students. After approximately 30 minutes of group work, the students joined back together. During the ensuing discussion, the professor emphasized that when it comes to research, it is impossible to be objective since the very act of designing a question is subjective. “We need our stories,” she explained, as if this was a helpful addition to their understanding.

Students were then told to answer the following question in 5 minutes: “As I listened to the readings, I wondered...” After answering this question, the professor instructed everyone to look back at what was written and circle key phrases. When it came time to share key points, Jeff read his question. “How much, if at all, do we need a common place for authentic dialogue?” Veronica added that what she really liked about this phrase was its question about finding a common place.

Beth then noted that commonality is a norm in our society. “We are more comfortable with people we have common ground with.” At this point Maria jumped in and said this was all very intense. Adam commented that we all bring our own baggage to the discussion.

The professor said she doesn’t like it when common frameworks are forced. She gave the example of how many people think literacy is simply about reading and writing. She asked “What about people with a different literacy?”

Mark expressed surprise at this point and said the definition of literacy is the ability to read and write. He wasn't sure what the professor meant by other literacies. The professor clarified by saying that in our society we should be able to read and write, but that we need to make sure we don't emphasize only one type of literacy since there are many ways to be literate.

At this point, Beth jumped in and mentioned multiple intelligences theory and noted that some people are better at some things than others. So, she concluded, we shouldn't emphasize reading and writing too much. Judy then observed that too much emphasis on English as a second language is an example of how an excessive focus on one language can lead to the loss of other languages.

The class then continued with hearing what other people had written down in response to the question. Trevor said "Our stories will be culturally constructed." He explained this meant that they would be unique to each person's area.

Nicole then said that the word that stuck out to her from all of this was "authenticity" but she was wondering what authenticity actually means. Students got into a discussion of this concept. Judy wrapped up this discussion by pointing out that a positivist view of authenticity seems common in our society today.

Nicole stated that "Everyone's authenticity is different." Mark then suggested that authentic seemed to be a buzzword in education circles these days. But he also acknowledged that too many people think in terms of black and white. Beth noted that it is not a comfortable experience to break out of this type of dichotomy.

The professor agreed, and said that being an anti-oppressive educator is not easy. She added that "We cannot remove ourselves from how we perceive ourselves." According to her, place is a meeting space. She shared that she struggled with the fact she bought her food at Superstore because it was cheap even though it would be better for society if she bought more expensive food at the farmer's market.

After this discussion wrapped up, the professor divided the students into four groups and gave them some time to plan for their critical ethnography assignments.

## Day 2

Students were divided into groups to discuss the readings for today. After about 40 minutes of discussion, the students got back together to summarize what they read.

The first group shared their thoughts about an article written by Arjun Appadurai.<sup>22</sup> Trevor observed that media can influence negatively and positively while Christine talked about how stereotypes are perpetuated. Lisa asked "How do you think the media influences other people's cultures and lives?" This led to some discussion.

The second group summarized "The Cultural Turn" by Andy Bennett.<sup>23</sup> Judy noted that culture is a reflexive process. She asked whether reflexivity of consumerism was intentional. "Local is a situating strategy," she added. The big question she wanted to ask was "Is globalization a unifying force and is multiculturalism still possible?"

Jeff asked for clarification about a particular quote in the article:

To put this another way, culture can no longer be regarded as a distinct ideological construct bespeaking a series of essentialist representations, pertaining, for example, to national identity, custom and habit, that function to maintain social order.<sup>24</sup>

There was a moment of silence until Veronica piped up. She explained that as a woman who is white and Canadian, certain societal expectations are placed upon her i.e. raising children, supporting her husband, etc. However, she is capable of going beyond these expectations. Judy then observed that the quote “goes beyond postmodernism.”

The professor then quoted a passage from page 58 of this article and asked students whether they agreed with it. After several minutes of searching, it was discovered that the professor was actually quoting from page 56:

In effect, individuals have become more and not less aware of themselves as critical agents through the process and practices of late modern consumption.<sup>25</sup>

The discussion was quite brief on this point—everyone who spoke up expressed agreement with the quote.

At this point, the professor wanted to know if anyone had other comments on the articles. It appeared that she had not budgeted her time well because this question seemed to be a “filler” to several of the students. After a short pause, Mark and Judy both talked about the negative influence of Westernized culture. The professor chimed in by asking “What is democracy?” and questioned whether it should be the same for everybody.

Judy noted that people have a tendency to compartmentalize. “Somehow we are all part of the same quilt.” Beth noted people often refer to a group culture when they talk about culture. Phyllis said that when she thinks of culture, she thinks of two words: identity and belonging.

Mark said he preferred the types of traditional cultural representations found at folk festivals as opposed to things such as skateboard culture. Judy seemed annoyed at this statement and asked whether this threatened his sense of belonging. Mark said he didn’t need to identify with a particular culture because he was Canadian first. This was clearly out of sync with the rest of the group because most of the students seemed genuinely perplexed at this statement.

Students then spent time discussing the influence of the media, both positive and negative. Mark noted that “culture is multi-sensory.” Several students spent time talking about how long one needs to be in a culture in order to understand it. It was noted that there is national culture, regional culture, rural culture, urban culture and so on. Judy then asked “Is there culture in place or is it a people thing?” No one had a clear answer although it clearly made students think deeply!

Judy raised the issue of the neo-liberal agenda and the threat it poses to society. At this point, Jeff asked her to explain what she meant by this phrase. She said

it means deregulation, free trade, individualism, and stifling labour movements. Jeff asked whether this agenda was intentional or unintentional. She said it was definitely intentional, and suggested that Prime Minister Stephen Harper is the key person behind it.

Maria added that the whole idea of a standard education is neo-liberalism. Judy added that standardized testing is neo-liberalism too. The professor jumped in to concur and referred to the World Bank as neo-liberal as well. Judy then mentioned that the World Bank and UN's emphasis on print-based literacy is another unfortunate example of neo-liberalism. No one expressed disagreement with these statements.

After a short break, students watched an eighteen minute TED Talk by Michael Wesch entitled "From Knowledgeable to Knowledge-Able."<sup>26</sup> In short, Wesch spoke about the need to go on to new concepts of learning. He said it was less important to memorize facts and more important to know how to use the information we find. The concept of acquiring information was described as a "very low concept of learning." Wesch criticized the way classrooms are set up because they portray the teacher as the source of information.

Ironically, after the video was watched, the professor said there wasn't time to discuss it. So the class ended up listening passively to a one-sided lecture for 18 minutes. Once again, a traditional teaching method was used to promote the romantic progressive teaching ideology that teachers shouldn't actually teach.

The professor then showed the students a 60 minute video entitled "Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh."<sup>27</sup> Essentially, the video purports to show how the introduction of Western ideas and technology damaged the traditional culture of the people of Ladakh. Interestingly, the professor did not give any information about who produced the video or what its agenda was. She certainly didn't mention that the video had an anti-Western ideological bent even though this became obvious very quickly.

Partway through the video, the professor asked whether the traditional culture of Ladakh could be described as developed. When one student mentioned that it had a low GDP, the professor jumped in and said "GDP is simply the dominant Western view of development". Clearly, the correct answer was to say that Ladakh was developing according to the perspective of their culture.

In the second half of the documentary, the Ladakh culture is shown to have deteriorated after being influenced by Western culture. Schools were now Westernized in their focus on print-based literacy and the Ladakh children are pressured to learn English.

When the professor asked students for their observations about the changes to their education system, students were ready with their answers. Beth commented "The education they are receiving doesn't let them live in their world." Nicole added that the sexual exploitation of women and their isolation are the hallmarks of the Western style education they received.

Judy then said that the same types of changes are happening in Canada today. According to her, this is more evidence of the neo-liberal agenda led by Stephen Harper.

To conclude the day, the professor said everyone was to answer “What is nature to you?” in their commonplace journals. They were also to reflect on the question, “Why must sustainability issues be considered cultural issues?”

## Day 3

As the day began, the professor asked students to give their answers to the “What is nature to you” question. Mark began by acknowledging that his white background influences his view of nature. He said nature is non-manmade.

Lisa said nature is not manufactured while Phyllis said nature is the natural body God has created. It is not distorted. Adam said nature was areas untouched by logging and was definitely NOT the tar sands in Alberta. The discussion on nature lasted about 20 minutes.

The professor then moved on to the question of why cultural issues and sustainability are connected. Trevor gave a lengthy, and rather incoherent answer, in which he concluded by saying culture and sustainability must go together. Veronica said the concept of sustainability is automatically connected to culture. Sustainability, she explained, cannot exist outside of the culture that is speaking of it.

If everything is interconnected, added the professor, we need to be holistic with our approach and cannot talk about sustainability separately. She said it is incorrect to talk about the economy, social services, and environment as three separate pillars. Rather than separate spheres, they are all in the same circle. “Ecological problems are experienced as social and economic problems.”

After that statement, the professor said they were now going to look at place. Groups were assigned and told to look at several articles and discuss specific questions related to them. This exercise was very poorly structured and students were given only 45 minutes to answer 20 questions. After about 30 minutes, the professor circulated among the groups and was surprised that they weren’t further along. The time for the discussion was extended to 1 hour, and the discussion went even past that point.

Once the group time was over, students gathered together to discuss the articles. The professor didn’t have enough question sheets for everyone and hadn’t even kept a paper copy for herself. So she put the questions on the screen but the font was too small for most people to read. Everyone waited awkwardly for several minutes while she tried to enlarge the font.

During the discussion, there were many long, awkward silences. Ultimately, the class ran out of time to go over the questions, so the professor just moved ahead without any further explanation. The questions themselves were never revisited.

The professor asked everyone to write down their personal definition of “environmental justice.” Everyone then spent some time talking about the stereotypes against environmentalists. Judy mentioned neo-liberalism while Maria mentioned that

Stephen Harper's enemies list included environmentalists.

The professor brought up colonialism and racism and their connection to toxic waste dump sites. She showed a chart contrasting multiculturalism with anti-racism. Multiculturalism was portrayed quite poorly because it doesn't challenge white privilege.

Mark added that he doesn't like the word "tolerant" because it is negative. Several others chimed in to agree. Clearly, this point hit a nerve with a number of people. Judy said, "Multiculturalism is just about tolerating." She clearly thought that was inadequate. Nicole said she gets sick to her stomach when government says we are all equal since our social situations make it clear that is not true. Veronica agreed with the other students that multiculturalism was too artificial.

The professor then showed the first half of a video by Loaded Pictures called H2OIL.<sup>28</sup> Essentially, it is a critique of the Alberta oil sands. Interestingly, the professor gave no description of the context of this video and made no mention of who produced it. Considering the alleged importance of critical thinking in education schools, these were surprising omissions.

In short, the video portrays the oil sands (which it calls the tar sands) as destructive to the environment. It also draws a direct parallel between the Iraq War and the oil boom in Alberta.

The professor asked students to give their thoughts on the video. Mark said that while nothing in the video surprised him, he still found it sad. Jeff then raised the question of how best to handle this type of issue in a public school classroom. He wanted to know whether teachers should present both sides of an issue or just the side he believed was correct.

Maria said there was no need to show another video since both sides were already adequately represented in this video. Since politicians who support the oil sands were interviewed, she argued, this counts as showing the other side. The fact that the interview snippets appeared to be selected to make the pro-oil sands politicians look as foolish as possible did not bother anyone.

Judy suggested teachers should teach critical discourse but only within the context of this video. Teachers should, in fact, get students to identify both sides of the issue in the video. Veronica added that she appreciated Jeff's question, but went on to say that a balanced view is impossible. "We cannot present both sides in an unbiased way," she stated.

She also said, "Multiple perspectives is problematic." She emphasized that teachers should not just present facts to students since they cannot leave everything up to them.

The professor then said that assuming neutrality already says something about our position. Judy mentioned the language of oil sands rather than tar sands and noted that the words we use already show our position. She said the oil sands was a term invented by Stephen Harper to try to make the tar sands look better.

The discussion concluded when the professors gave students two questions to consider.

- 1) Map how you see yourself in relation to culture, place, and identity.
- 2) What do the readings tell us about why an autobiography is worth doing?

## Day 4

The first half of the day was spent discussing the four assigned readings. The format was different because the professor had summarized some of the main ideas from the articles on a PowerPoint presentation, which she reviewed with the students.

In the first article, the concepts of identity and difference were explored.<sup>29</sup> When the professor asked what struck the students about the article, Jeff mentioned the difference between the essentialist and non-essentialist ways of looking at identity. Essentialist refers to fixed characteristics (i.e. race) while non-essentialist refers to fluid characteristics (i.e. occupation). The professor said that Jeff's definition of these concepts was correct.

Judy talked about the connection between bullying and identity. When the topic of gender came up, Judy said she still finds it difficult to ask students what gender they prefer to be identified by. However, she added it is very important to stop assuming certain pronouns for people, but rather to ask if they prefer he, she, or they.

Veronica mentioned how we are too quick to assume we know someone's sexuality. She expressed regret that she has sometimes asked women she doesn't know that well what their husbands do for a living. Apparently she finds it hard to avoid these social constructs but is trying to do better.

Trevor observed that our identity changes as we move. However, it took him 5 minutes of rambling to come to this point, which really just restated something the professor had already put on the screen. Everyone either thought he made sense or was too polite to say otherwise.

At this point, the professor continued with the gender theme by expressing frustration with being identified as a wife. She said one of the reasons she kept her maiden name was to have her own identity. Several female students concurred with this reasoning.

Judy then asked, "Did anyone pick up on the subjectivities?" There was a moment of silence. Nicole then mentioned that we all have subjectivity.

Veronica then said, "There is a difference between being subjective and subjectivity." However, she added that she finds it hard to explain the difference.

The professor jumped in and said that "being subjective" is a verb while "subjectivity" is a noun. To get clarification, Jeff asked whether he could say that, "Being subjective influences my subjectivity." The professor replied, "Yes, that makes sense."

When the conversation shifted to the ways in which information is gathered, the

professor said, "Positivism has not been accepting of other ways of gathering data." She then observed in regards to qualitative research that it "has been a struggle to get scholars to accept other ways of knowing."

The second half of the day consisted of the three groups traveling to their "research" locations to gather data for their upcoming ethnographic presentations.

## Day 5

When class began, the professor asked students to share their concept maps of the relationship between themselves, culture, and identity. Jeff said that he wrote the words me, identity, and culture all on top of each other to symbolize how they are all interconnected. Other students shared rather complex maps that also conveyed ways in which they thought these concepts were interconnected.

Mark then said, "Because I'm a white, middle-class male, I've never been discriminated against." He commented that he never needs to think about identity because he never feels out of place. His tone made it clear that he was expressing regret over his privileged status.

Veronica thanked Jeff for this revelation and said it took a lot of courage for him to share that. Judy added she sometimes feels like she didn't belong in certain social justice groups because, as a white woman, she doesn't have the same experiences of oppression to share with others.

The professor then showed a slide titled "brainstorm" with two focusing questions.

### 1. What has enabled change for you?

Nicole said power and we can have power over change. Paula said new relationships while Judy answered motivation. According to Trevor, "Enlightenment comes before power." Christine answered "the ability to reflect and think critically." Veronica said she is "trying to foster an ambiguous sense of self rather than a defined sense of self."

### 2. Can you talk of powerful socioecological learning experiences for you or your students?

There was lots of discussion about why it is easier to change when one is in unfamiliar surroundings.

The professor then showed more slides. One featured a quote from an education student. "I know now that I don't want to be the provider of knowledge but rather the facilitator of experience." The following quote from the course textbook was also presented on another slide:

Cultural understandings that value the individual over the collective, humans over other species, concept over experience, progress as globalizing growth and change, print-based literacies as universally desirable, and other affiliated assumptions and values, are examples of the sorts of imaginaries that can be traced in the ecological and cultural losses we are currently experiencing and

participating in around the world.<sup>30</sup>

Picking up on this point, the professor mentioned again that literacy is not just print-based and that other literacies need equal emphasis. She then showed a 4 minute video that had been put together by students in another education foundations course. Among other things, the video claimed that virtually all Western institutions are racist and misogynous.

Everyone then went outside in order to experience nature in a “sensuous” way. However, the professor wasn’t sure exactly where to go so everyone wandered around for about 5 minutes until they found an area with some benches. Students were divided into four groups and given 5 minutes to prepare a 20-minute presentation about an article assigned to them. Shortly thereafter the time to prepare was extended to about 30 minutes because 5 minutes was clearly not adequate. After all groups finished preparing, everyone sat down on the grass.

Group 1 consisted of Judy, Veronica, and Mark. They had everyone sit around in a tight-knit circle while the three of them sat in the middle with their backs to each other. They each took turns reading from their assigned article, which consisted of an imaginary conversation between a raven and a coyote about the school system.<sup>31</sup> Judy then told students that they were going to shapeshift. Everyone was told to walk to a place where they felt “pulled” and spend time analyzing an object of nature before coming back to share their experiences with other students.

Everyone seemed to take this activity quite seriously. After gathering back together, the group leaders told everyone to take a shape to represent their chosen object. The group then continued reading excerpts from the article while these shape positions were held for several minutes. Students then had the opportunity to share and say how they were drawn to the trees and grass. Everyone seemed quite impressed by the reading and this activity.

Group 2 consisted of Lisa, Nicole, and Adam. They told the others to write down the five senses and leave a little blank beside them. Everyone was to close their eyes and then write down what they heard. The same thing was done with other senses such as smell, touch, and taste. Afterwards, people were asked to share what they wrote and what memories were triggered. Presumably this was intended to be an example of sensuous learning.

Group 3, Christine, Beth, Paula, and Maria, read a story to the group and had everyone stand up and act it out. Some of the students, most notably Judy, really got into the acting and were hopping like frogs and running across the field when told to do so.

The final group consisted of Jeff, Trevor, and Phyllis. Jeff started out by reading several quotes from their assigned article.<sup>32</sup> The article began by describing the Holocaust during World War II and then drawing a parallel between that event and environmental degradation today:

Compare this [the Holocaust] record with the current alarming rate of species extinction brought on by human beings’ rapacious presence on this planet. What we are witnessing is ecocide. Could it be that this ecocide is due to

humanity’s inability to perceive and feel the intrinsic worth of the other—in this case, nonhuman beings.... The thesis that such ecological psychic numbing has become a pervasive condition in modernity has been put forth by a number of thinkers in our time.<sup>33</sup>

My hope is that this chapter helps environmental educators see that their fundamental task is to change, not just the content of our perception, but the very modality of perception.... When we can see the world as a sacred space, then it is most unlikely that we would violate and exploit the world. The question is: How do we cleanse the doors of perception?<sup>34</sup>

Jeff then asked what everyone thought of these statements, particularly the idea that ecocide should be considered directly on par with the genocide that took place during the Holocaust. No one expressed any concern that this conclusion was too extreme. In fact, the only reticence expressed was that the word ecocide might make people feel the environmental situation is hopeless. Several of the students suggested that a more hopeful term should be selected. Not a single student stood up for the idea that humanity should take precedence over other forms of life.

The course lasted for several more days, and essentially the same teaching and learning format and non sequitur discussions took place.

## Analyzing this course

The description of this graduate course in education foundations confirms many of the concerns expressed by other writers about education schools in both Canada and the United States. These concerns should raise questions about the type of education that practicing teachers receive in schools of education. Some of the most notable generalizations are as follows.

1) The course was filled with meaningless edu-babble.

Many of the statements made during the course were nonsensical. Some of the vacuous phrases expressed included, “Everyone’s authenticity is different,” “There is a difference between being subjective and subjectivity,” “I am trying to foster an ambiguous sense of self rather than a defined sense of self,” and “We cannot remove ourselves from how we perceive ourselves.” Ironically, students seemed to think many of these statements were actually quite profound.

In addition, the assigned readings were often equally incomprehensible. Not only did they contain absurdly long run-on sentences, meaningless phrases, and imaginary words, some even incorporated animal sounds. Consider this verbatim excerpt from the textbook:

caw! wraaakk! harrroooooo! be careful coyote  
you may be walking into linguistic quick/sand/lime

half a wit is not always better than none!

so don't argue with one<sup>35</sup>

James Koerner's skewering of Educanto, the peculiar dialect of education also known as edu-babble, seems particularly relevant to this course.<sup>36</sup> While his book was written more than fifty years ago, edu-babble clearly remains alive and well in education schools.

2) Students spent an excessive amount of time naval gazing and bemoaning the unfortunate status of white privilege in society.

In *Ed School Follies*, Rita Kramer noted that the student teachers she met wanted to change the world even though they didn't seem to know much about it:

These student teachers are being encouraged to "transform" a world they know almost nothing about, either in the complexity of its present arrangements or the various routes by which it became the way it is. They know next to nothing of past disasters or triumphs, successes and mistakes. And nothing of the relentless way in which human nature reasserts itself in age after age, inconveniently limiting the possibilities for the most ambitious social plans. Sure of themselves as only those ignorant of history can be, they feel no need for tolerance of their own imperfect but relatively free society. All they know is that it isn't everything they think it should be. To them, that seems evidence enough for an indictment.<sup>37</sup>

In this course, the naval gazing never relented as students regularly talked about the need to develop their authentic selves. They discussed the "multi-sensory" nature of culture and devoted significant time to analyzing what nature means to them. Even the distinction between "being subjective" and "subjectivity" was deemed worthy of class time. Any topic that involved significant introspection always received top priority. No relevant philosophical or sociological literature was referenced, however.

Caucasian students in the course regularly made reference to the unfortunate reality of "white privilege" in society. One observed that being a white male means he has never been discriminated against. Another student expressed her discomfort being involved in social justice groups as a white female since she did not have the same experience with exclusion as other group members. Many references were made during the discussions and in the required readings to the negative influence of Western, colonial values. This was often assumed rather than systematically examined.

Multiculturalism came under criticism by the professor because it did not adequately challenge white privilege. Also, students were quick to dismiss tolerance as a negative concept that did not truly promote equality. Even a local mother's centre came under criticism by students for being sexist and oppressive since its name did not explicitly include queer and transgendered people. No omission or supposed slight to a minority group was too minor for this group of students.

3) As is common with the romantic progressive approach to teaching, the course

focused on the so-called process of learning rather than on the content.

On the first day, the professor made it clear to the students that she was going to be a “facilitator of learning” rather than a teacher of specific content. The lack of tests or exams confirmed that students would not need to know any particular facts or theories. During the course, the professor regularly allowed discussions to deviate from the topic which allegedly led to a deeper learning experience for everyone involved.

During one of her lectures, the professor displayed a slide that featured a quote from a former education student. “I know now that I don’t want to be the provider of knowledge but rather the facilitator of experience.” This reflects the standard view of education schools that a teacher should be “a guide on the side rather than a sage on the stage.”<sup>38</sup>

The professor also made repeated comments about the need to focus less on print-based literacy (reading and writing) and more on other forms of literacy (pictorial). She considered it deeply problematic that the United Nations is pushing reading and writing on everyone. These types of comments fit well with the romantic progressive approach because it de-emphasizes traditional academic skills. In addition, by allowing students to submit all assignments, even the final papers, in “non-prose” form, the professor sent a clear message that traditional academic skills were unimportant.

4) The professor and students expressed very one-sided political views and displayed a strong bias against the so-called “Western, colonial influence” in our society. Virtually all the assigned readings also reflected this bias.

During a class discussion, no one saw any problem with the direct comparison one of the authors made between the Holocaust and modern-day environmental degradation.<sup>39</sup> The article called the extinction of nonhuman species “ecocide” and said that “psychic numbing” is the reason more people do not care about this problem.<sup>40</sup> Even though the vast majority of people would deny that the Holocaust and the extinction of non-human species are morally equivalent, no one in this course saw any problem with equating them.

When it came to environmental issues, only one side was ever presented. For example, the video H2OIL presented a one-sided attack on the Alberta oil sands.<sup>41</sup> Not only did the professor fail to mention any alternative views, she made no effort to identify the perspective of the producers of this documentary. During the discussion afterwards, most of the students suggested this video adequately reflected both sides of this issue since it contained short quotes from politicians who supported the extraction of oil from the oil sands.

Students and the professor made regular references to the negative effects of “Western, colonial, influence” and talked about the need to move away from this perspective. One of the students regularly criticized “neo-liberal ideology” and openly identified Prime Minister Stephen Harper as a key source of the problem. At no point did the professor or any other students challenge this point of view. Clearly, there was little variation among the political views of the people in this course.

5) Some of the learning activities seemed better suited for an elementary school classroom than a graduate level course.

During one outdoor session, students participated in a “shapeshifting” activity. Each person was told to walk toward an object they felt “pulled” to and imitate it for 5 minutes. They were then to come back to the group and act out the object they saw. Spending several minutes pretending to be a tree or a piece of grass might be appropriate for elementary school students or perhaps drama students, but it does not appear to be graduate level course work in a professional program.

Another activity involved writing down the 5 senses and then making note of what was being experienced at that moment. Students were to write down what they could see, hear, smell, touch, and taste. This activity was done in the name of “sensuous” learning. While it makes sense to expect grade 1 students to practice identifying their 5 senses, this is not something graduate students should need to do.

***“She considered it deeply problematic that the United Nations is pushing reading and writing on everyone. These types of comments fit well with the romantic progressive approach because it de-emphasizes traditional academic skills.”***

# Conclusion

The challenges facing education schools should not be understated. Many researchers have identified significant problems with the quality of training provided to prospective teachers and the professional development given to practicing teachers. Even though there are a large number of education schools across North America, the criticisms leveled against them tend to remain consistent regardless of where they happen to be located or when the studies happen to be conducted.

The education foundations course described in this report exemplifies the serious nature of these criticisms. Not only did this course fail to provide students with appropriate graduate level work, it doesn't even merit undergraduate credit. Students spent more time naval gazing and discussing irrelevant issues than actually engaging with the hard work of developing a better understanding of teaching and learning. Instead of exposing students to a wide variety of views and perspectives, the professor chose to assign one-sided video clips and articles that more closely resembled environmentalist propaganda than serious academic research and scholarship.

What makes this state of affairs even more unacceptable is that practicing teachers regularly take these types of courses in order to increase their salaries. Under current collective agreements across the country, pay scales for teachers are determined by their years of experience and their years of university education. A teacher with a post-graduate diploma or a master's degree receives a higher salary than a teacher with less education even though there is no evidence that completing more education courses leads to better teaching. If anything, students who completed this education foundations course will become worse—not better—teachers if they actually incorporate some of the edu-babble into their practice.

In order to regain some level of credibility, universities need to review the courses offered by their education schools and ensure that they meet the necessary academic standards. Courses filled with meaningless edu-babble and simplistic assignments need to be substantially revised or dropped altogether. If the status quo remains in effect, the reputation of education schools and the professors who teach in them will continue to decline.

Provincial governments should also take a hard look at teacher certification requirements and the teacher pay scales found in collective agreements. Instead of giving automatic raises for completing a series of useless education courses, pay increases should instead be linked to the teachers' performances in their classroom. If raises for increased qualifications must remain in effect, these should be limited to teachers who complete additional degrees in the subject areas they teach. As for the initial certification of teachers, provinces should explore alternative options for teacher certification that could involve receiving training somewhere other than in education schools. This type of competition could provide education schools with the impetus they need to finally improve their instruction.

Until every education school in Canada is forced to get serious about cracking down on the edu-babble and offer academically rigorous training, they will continue to be held in low esteem by other university departments and the general public.

**“Courses filled with meaningless edu-babble and simplistic assignments need to be substantially revised or dropped altogether. If the status quo remains in effect, the reputation of education schools and the professors who teach in them will continue to decline.”**

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## Further Reading

August 2012

# Zero Support for No-zero Policies

By Michael Zwaagstra

[www.fcpp.org/files/5/PS140\\_ZeroSupportID\\_AG20F1.pdf](http://www.fcpp.org/files/5/PS140_ZeroSupportID_AG20F1.pdf)

October 2011

# Standardized Testing Is a Good Thing

By Michael Zwaagstra

[www.fcpp.org/files/1/PS119StandardizedTesting.pdf](http://www.fcpp.org/files/1/PS119StandardizedTesting.pdf)

For more see

[www.fcpp.org](http://www.fcpp.org)

*Ideas for a Better Tomorrow*

