

Straight to the Point or Learning in the Round? Summerhill or the State Pen? What the Film
“News of the World” Suggests about Education and Human Understanding.

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The first duty of an education is to stir up life, but then leave it free to develop

Maria Montessori

In Paul Greengrass’ 2021 film “News of the World,” we follow the story of post -Civil War soldier, Captain Kidd, making his living reading varied newspapers to illiterate small town listeners in Texas. The world is broken in post war Texas, and times rough and dangerous. On the road between towns, Kidd comes upon a lone white teen girl loose in the woods. It turns out that she is in the process of being repatriated to her German kin after having lived with the Kiowa Indians for most of her life, her immediate family murdered by the Kiowa years earlier. Now the Kiowa have been killed in turn, and the U.S. government had commissioned a chaperone to take her home. She only knows Kiowa, and her chaperone murdered in the Texas wood, she is wildly caught between worlds. Kidd too, lives in a liminal zone between his idyllic pre-war and hard scrabble post war existence. He reluctantly takes on the responsibility of seeing the girl home to her German kin, whom she does not remember. As Kidd and Johanna travel, their shared trials bring them slowly together, despite no common language. They find a way to talk. They start sharing words for bird, for buffalo, for cactus, juniper, and the first word common to both English and Kiowa, “sage.” The surprise of ‘sage’ enlarges their field of enquiry, and Johanna, offers “*daum*,” a Kiowa word for the earth and the things associated with

it, and “*pahn*,” or sky, for all of the greater dimension. Bring them together, she suggests through gesture, the “*daum*” and the “*pahn*” constitute the “*daw*” or breath, the spirit in all things.

Captain Kidd listens and considers, surmising her description as a ‘kind of collective’ then, or a “circle” of understanding? He explains to Johanna that as such, her *daum*, *pahn*, and *daw* run counter to his own culture’s view of the world. Things with his people are not whole, *per se*, but segmented into parts. In his world, people move in straight lines, from “point to point.” Johanna laughs at the distinction, noting that it is all “*gut*.” It is the first German word she uses, and it surprises, even shocks, them both. Nor does it take long for her to remember more German, and Kidd to start speaking to her in bits of Kiowa as they travel. Writ large, this interblending of linguistic realities represents the thematic undercurrent of the entire tale, for while Kidd’s “point to point” creates the overt storyline as they travel, a more holistic bonding of the two becomes the quietly significant element shaping the narrative.

While I will leave it to the film to explicate the details, the ultimate truth about a holistic understanding at work in “News of the World” addresses our entire western way of thinking, and as a subset, our contemporary American classroom, imbued as it is with the apparatus of point to point teaching living and learning, the logic of it, the brackets, the scaffolds and scripts -- its measurability. *Et cetera*. For the purposes of this paper, I do lump it all together, and submit that living too exclusively according to the methods of this lump in our classrooms has resulted in something critically missing from the learning environment we seek to create. This exclusivity has not always constituted the story of education. But if the problem with point to point has brought us to a crisis now, we have long ago come by it honestly.

Point to point, as metaphor, has a long history in Western thought. Socrates’ best pupil Plato, for example, offers the Theory of Forms as a paradigm upon which we still hang much of

our thinking. According to the theory, all material things are derived secondary versions of ideal immaterial perfect things existing in a kind of intangible space. In effect, Socrates/Plato offers us the first official paradigm that judges one form by its parts, set in relation to an abstract version of things or ideas, thereby creating a kind of framework by which truth is understood, even created. A few decades later Aristotle changes the Socratic paradigm by locating the immaterial perfect idea of a thing in the “thing itself.” As a result, we observe everyday cats, for example, and while this one is white, that black, the other calico, they all hunt and eat mice. Hence we can know that the ideal immaterial concept of catness within the material one hunts and eats mice. We have framed conceptual truth. And *voilà*, the scientific method of using evidence to arrive at conclusion is born. And sure, it is important, even essential to understanding our world. Yet it does beg the question-- if a truth cannot be so captured by a method, does it exist? If not, would we even want it?

We have long had problems accepting that anything exists outside the intellectual frameworks we use to understand the world-- even if the frames themselves are suspect. Consider what happens when our attempt to frame reality by method fails, undermining the method. The 6th Century BCE Greek Pythagoras has to imagine, for example, that there was a tenth planet that we cannot see, just on the always dark side of the moon—his *antichthon*, (Burnet, 297) always shadowing us, filling out the ten planets to conform with his universal system of TENS (Tetractys) for ascertaining truth. He has to skew truth in order to confirm his method for ascertaining and framing it. I liken the manipulation of his *schema* to our own contemporary movement towards seeing the measurable assessment of education as more important than the education itself. Both fill the same need to will into existence a kind of methodological completion, even if monkeying with truth is required

And we have a long history of faking systems to frame truth, once we think a truth useful. But we have perhaps not always done this. Confucius in the 5th century BCE, remembers in his *Analecets* a past time when there were gaps in the histories (Legge, 301). A strange circumstance, we can imagine, because we know what always happens to gaps, right? We must fill them in, as did Pythagoras. Perhaps Confucius was a romantic. But the fraudulence of our cooked framework eventually shows. Euclidean Geometry in the 19th century, for example, became of necessity many geometries, because one set of theorems could not hold together the whole. Likewise, the French Mathematician Poincare notes that mathematical truths have always proven themselves not eternal ones, becoming instead “definitions, assumptions or hypotheses,” or as he suggests, works of the imagination (Myth/Logos, page ¼) More recently, Davis and Hersh note that mathematics itself has no existence outside of the human mind, and refer to Russell and Whitehead’s failed attempt to tie Mathematics directly to logic. Its famous failure was encapsulated in Godel’s Theorem of 1931, which proved that in a system of sufficient complexity, such as theories of numbers, there must exist statements that cannot be proven either true or false (Mlodinow, 149). In Godel’s words, we must acknowledge a third category, that of the “possible but unknown.” The whole truth, it seems, remains suggestively beyond the horizon of the frame. WTF?

I think all of us can recognize in our world of non-stop assessment, the contemporary illustration of systems filling in the gaps, and oftentimes, we are complicit. Once we have got ourselves into the habit of trusting and knowing systems of thought, our very familiarity with such systems quite reasonably inclines us when in doubt to double down on trust, double down on system, the destabilized truth of which we embrace as a frenzied frightened lover. But obviously, embracing fictions is not healthy. Going once more to the past, and to the East,

Confucius recognizes this tendency to double down when he spoke of societies that become too dependent on rules and laws (Legge, 140). . Through usage, we become addicted to rules, creating more and more, so that eventually, those who are subordinate to the rules no longer internally know right from wrong, no longer recognizing for themselves how to “move hand or foot (Legge 264).” Rather, their thought process and consequently their behavior becomes fully enacted according to externalized paradigms. Rather than think about an action, let’s say, action becomes validated by whether it is acceptable or unacceptable to external agency, not from anything internal to the teacher, the student, or the discipline of teaching and learning.

Yet we cannot seem to help ourselves from going deeper down into a fictional system upon which we depend, once we get a sense of its fiction. Its lure comes from being familiar, and familiarity breeds a comfort, an ease--because when agency in the classroom as in society, is externally imposed, the thinking is already done for us, and all that matters henceforth is whether or not we are rewarded or punished by the paradigms within which we function. And yet we know the by-product of functioning in such a way, for us, for students. Fatigue. Our too often present condition in academia. What is perhaps more concerning, we have too often come to live and learn within the quiet desperation of a multitude of fictional paradigms misaligned with our intentions as educators. Yet the future depends on us to think clearly, honestly, sharing what we know with upcoming generations.

To the degree that we accept the readymade world of the sketchy paradigm as the exclusionary conveyor of truth, we miss something as teachers and learners. As illustration, the Semiotologist Roland Barthes suggests what we miss in his essay “Toys” where he notes that a toy truck, or a toy airplane, or a Barbie doll communicates a false message to kids who play with them. Such toys send kids the message that the world is already whole, created, encompassed.

The only job for a child is to grow into that readymade world, not impact or change it. By contrast, Barthes notes, wood blocks compel students to create things that come and go as the creating kid sees fit (Barthes, 53-56). How different from a toy truck is a plain wood block? Yet which is more prevalent in our world, or our assessment driven classroom? I certainly do not wish to completely demean the readymade world of the toy truck, but how can we as educators get a little clear of our increasing dependence on the truck for all of our truth? Especially when it likely does not represent truth as solidly as it asserts? We know there is a world that exists before our thinking about it, just as speech existed before grammar, so we must acknowledge the limits of the readymade trucks, plans and systems that we use for conveying truth. They are not sacred. They are limited and limiting. We would do better to think about them as does Groucho Marx, who famously said “these are my principles—if you don’t like them, I have others (Shapiro, 498).” For if we all had Groucho’s attitude towards our various principles and frameworks, we would not find ourselves as educators in such a pickle now. And how preserved is our pickle?

Outgunned by those with tremendous power and money, we have lost control of educational agency, so corporate and political entities have imposed their own external orders on us, across the educational byways. They have commodified our intention for their own, diametrically opposed ends. They want to make money, and perhaps control people. That is their point to point. As Jennifer Washburn notes, education now runs on a “commercial ethos,” a contractual plan, with its balance tilted towards money and away from education. (Washburn, xv). Starting in the 70s, federal, state, and local appropriations to fund universities, for example, dropped, in favor of privately supported ones. And the result? On the broader scale, Harvard’s Public Health Center downplayed a government report noting alarming levels of heavy metals in our bodies, perhaps because the majority of the Institutes’ funding came from “chemical and pesticide

manufacturers (Washburn xvi).” In 1998 Berkeley entered into an agreement with a Swiss Pharmaceutical company that for departmental funding, gave the company, Novartis, first rights to research produced by Berkeley’s lab, even if that research was state funded (Washburn, 3). And at UC Davis, the Nutrition Department released its study showing that the regular consumption of chocolate was good for the health, only for others to find that the study was funded by Mars, the makers of M&Ms, Milky Ways, and Snickers (Washburn, 24). And this is just the beginning, the early years, the obvious years. These initial takeovers of research started the steady but sure process of taking over education and information to serve corporate ends, separate from truth—much like the Pythagorean *antichthon*, but for darker ends, with more at stake.

Corporate groups have not only insinuated their way into research for their own purposes, but as Tenam-Zemach, Conn, and Parkison note, they now control much of educational policy, and through a control of curriculum, our relationships with our students, coopting our very professional identities as well as our purpose. Grounded in the three “technologies” for assessing education, “market, management, and performance” corporate influence has been altering the reality of education in a negative way to such a degree that many of us no longer recognize our profession, even as we cannot easily stop the external takeover because we as teachers are out of our financial and political depths (AIC 5). Further making our professional lot difficult, corporate entities are overtaking us using the tools with which we too are most familiar—the point to point, the framing narratives, the logical wholes, the outcome defined process. And we sense it even if we do not know it. So while Jodi Holen writes of (2/18) our collective anger over what is happening, we nevertheless “accede to the imposition” of corporate patterning because we are intimidated by its power over us as educators and recognize its methods

Subsequently, we administer tests that we recognize as sensible but that we sense are invalid, write up assessments reports that seem reasonable, but that we suspect as fictional, and submit such reports in timely fashion, the while growing all the more tired by the process.

How strange. The false paradigms by which we assess and report seem as if they are our own, yet we can no more separate the reasonable qualities of a paradigm from its inherent fraudulence anymore than can a little finger commit a revolution against the hand (Stephen Crane, diff context). So things grow worse while corporate models such as “scripted curriculum” insinuate themselves further into our half dead educational corpse. And what does “worse” mean? The Brookings Institute notes that university tuition today is at least 11 times higher than the benchmark year, 1980, that Private and Public K-12 costs is also dramatically up (4.7), while literacy rates are down. Literacy scores peaked in the United States in 1975, and math peaked in the 1990s (Rothwell, 1/4) The U.S. ranks dead last among 26 countries tested in both Literacy and Math (Rothwell, 2/4). Likewise, Wyner Bridgeland and Dilulio note that lower income families (3.4 million) fail to rise academically, and are less likely to complete a bachelor’s degree (page 3 summary), because the deck is stacked against their achievement (3/31) Yet we know intelligence is not based on class or economics. It is found everywhere. So we hurt ourselves by this constraining circumstance. And our rote response to the externalized approach to assessing our way to higher achievement? Like our students and their thinning academic engagement, we are increasingly conditioned to simply ask, as Holen notes, ‘what do you want me to do. Tell me and I will do it (Holen 2/18).’ Both teachers and students have now had years of immersion in familiar systems that deny individual volition, creativity, and innovation, while at the same time promising all three.

In short, we are inundated by a likely fictional point to point system of “standards, testing, and accountability,” Paul Parkinson notes, and have become disempowered thereby (Parkinson 1/10). We cannot even see a clear way out, because the corporate enemy looks a lot like us. We think using its terms, and can hardly imagine an escapeway. Even Holen, a firebrand educator promoting the need for creativity in the classroom, offers a solution from the Netherlands that suggests we can rediscover the creative classroom again if only we embrace Korthagen’s “Model of Core Reflection,” that much like Bloom’s Taxonomy, offers yet another fictional set of five phases that used properly, will purportedly turn on all the learning lights once again. How disappointing. Holen lost me on phase one of the paradigm, the point to point, phase to phase methodology, because I have seen it all before (Holen, 11). We have all seen it before, and as Jabari Mahiri notes, it is dulling that the best we can muster in defense of our profession nowadays is too often just another set of objectives (Mahiri, 7). *Blah.*

So what in the heck can we do? Let me suggest, as does Johanna in “News of the World,” that it is time we make a departure from the structured method based, rubricky scaffolded and fictional paradigms for teaching learning and assessing. For a little while, anyway, let’s search for ways to step off the path—depart from any rules, for all of them are partly sham. Do it for your students. Do it for the world. I am reminded of D.T. Suzuki’s famous talk on Zen Buddhism years ago. To achieve enlightenment, he said, one must strictly follow the traditional Buddhist Noble 8-Fold Path. That path is as follows: #1, “you must hold the right view,” he explains. “#2,” he begins again, but pauses, “Oh sorry, I forget number 2, but #3 you must hold to right speech, action’.....on and on (Watts, intro). Or again to Groucho, who has extra principles if you need them. Important because Suzuki’s faulty memory and Groucho’s irreverence partly demythologizes the sanctity of principles, or rules, or order, and puts them in proper context—

they are useful and important, but not sacred or eternal or comprehensive. They are simply a part of a larger whole that begs to be acknowledged. And indeed, as educators, we have already identified ways around the sacred altar of false schematics.

Maria Montessori as early as the 1940s notes that we must let our children play with real objects—not play versions of them. Let them play with a wine glass, for example. Sure, they will break a few glasses, but they will soon enough gain the sense of the glass in their hand, its texture, its purpose, its fragility and use. Naturally their relationship with the glass will become appropriate on its own, so fewer glasses will be broken (Montessori, the 1946 London Lectures, and *Montessori-minded Mom* 1-15). Her suggestion, in effect, sets students on a course of exploration and discovery in a way the toy truck, for example, does not. If this is true, then it seems to me that offering both teachers and students the opportunity to think and learn outside the framework of an objective or of an externally measured activity offers the same sorts of opportunity to internally develop some sense of a learned truth as does Montessori's glass, for it opens up the possibility for developing awareness through discovered rather than simply inhabited context—and we all know that discovery is essential to learning.

Or consider that grand experiment in turn of the century England, Summerhill, the “student democracy,” (Nash, 43) where young rebellious people were never made to learn, or to do much of anything, so came to learning on their own, as something interesting and engaging, came for its magic, for its possibility, for its society. Public school obviously cannot operate at such leisure, but perhaps a class a week where there is no agenda other than to do something loosely related to the topic of the class, something that potentially leads to discoveries without any irritable reaching after reflective assessment of the experience. Or as art students used to do, we should all engage in a little aimless walking, out in the world or around our classroom.

subjects, so to speak, poking in this or that, observing the world with no *apriori* purpose and no post-purpose report. Doing so may help teachers and students alike reawaken in us some sense of Johanna and Kidd's *daum* and *pahn*, inferring the *daw*, immeasurable in number or scope, so impossible to dismiss. The ineffable breath of the universe, as of teaching, learning, life.

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