

told, was to be found in the increased rice production and income. Little was mentioned of the real problem, that of securing viable livelihoods for the vast majority of displaced individuals. Like the local inhabitants, who were cleared and distanced from the development operation, I was hard-pressed to discern which aspect of the project was a direct result of Canadian funding.

The much smaller project grew out of the expressed needs of a group of villagers to cultivate cocoa on a previously unused river island nearby.

They also wanted to raise sheep on some available land near their village. Canadian assistance included procuring the initial small flock of sheep, then necessary cocoa seedlings, and regular veterinarian and agricultural advice. All the labor involved in the project (fencing, hand clearing of the overgrown island, etc.) was supplied by the villagers themselves. Clearly these two projects differed markedly in their approach to sustainable development and relate directly to what has been termed in the issue the concept of developing sustainability, that is, of turning the traditional concept around whereby sustainability becomes the desired end, not development. The newly formed cocoa planters and sheep raisers in the village understood this concept well.

There is much of interest and value for academics and practitioners alike in this second special issue. In a sense it represents a move away from the traditional transmissional model of development education to one more transactional in nature. If the challenges outlined for this decade are met, the promised third special issue will go beyond the previous two to achieve a true transformation in Canadian development education.

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Greta Hoffmann Nemiroff.
RECONSTRUCTING EDUCATION:
TOWARD A PEDAGOGY OF CRITICAL HUMANISM.
Toronto, OISE Press, 1992.
216 pp., \$24.50.

Life 101: What Gets Taught?

Greta Hoffmann Nemiroff's *Reconstructing Education*, the story of the New School of Montreal's Dawson College, recounts the following episode: Linda isn't keeping up with her homework, partly because of her

job and partly because of her divorced father who insists that on the nights that she doesn't work, Linda prepare his meals. Someone in the class asks what he eats other nights; someone else observes that he must be very thin, going without dinner three times a week. Oh no, Linda assures them, he weighs 300 pounds. As soon as she says this, however, she looks stricken and understands both her father's manipulation and her own susceptibility to it. After more discussions with her classmates, she decides she will confront him and insist on a more emotionally independent relationship. It is a powerful and liberating moment for Linda, suddenly seeing herself anew and vowing to change. It is powerful too, no doubt, for her classmates to have a friend become a study in the complexities and frailties of human life. The question is whether it deserves college credit.

That question is anything but frivolous, and the value of this book is that we are forced to ask it. Most accounts of an educational institution would inquire whether if what is done is done well; given that Nemiroff describes a program clearly out of the mainstream, the more likely question is whether it should be done at all. The New School tries to put into practice "critical humanism," an educational philosophy that melds humanistic and critical pedagogy. Taking from the first, it insists attention be paid to the "whole learner"; from the second, it insists we see students within their social and political contexts so that they themselves can discover and learn what they need. Only by looking at once within and without the individual, Nemiroff argues, can schools teach students to "develop intellectual strategies for empowerment."

There's an interesting subtext. Reading *Reconstructing Education*, we're reminded that curriculum is a political issue before it is an intellectual one; only those with power can choose what is taught. And before that, it's a religious question, a matter of faith. There are, of course, as many competing views about what should be taught as there are religions. Should a curriculum be about finding what is timeless and universal or about what is immediate and practical? Should it be about helping people conform to a society or radically change it? Or should it be—and here's where Nemiroff's first sympathies lie—about the individual's unique, native capacities and how schools must foster the person's psychological, social, and moral well-being. Curriculum builders may have God on their side, but it's probably better to have funding.

So, who at the New School has the power to decide what gets taught? Students and teachers. Their primary social structure is the "band . . . the compulsory primary affiliative group of ten to sixteen people, usually formed for the duration of a term and for one credit per student" (p.118). Nemiroff characterizes the band as the backbone of the school, the place of

the most intense focus on personal growth. A band's curriculum, she writes, "address[es] those issues and concerns which are most crucial to each band's membership." That is naturally a movable feast, changing along with changes in constituency. In practice, "facilitators" (mostly faculty) prepare profiles before term of who they are and what they're interested in teaching; students shop around and negotiate what they'll study. Eventually, bands are formed and school begins.

And what gets studied? The academic subjects—what must be "harmonized with the norms established by the state" (p.141)—are mostly things like literature, fine arts, and social sciences; there's also such exotica as tai chi, clown workshops, and the Tao of physics. That the physical sciences are taught so infrequently—and certainly not as university pretraining—doesn't mean the New School wouldn't teach them; it's just that its students and instructors aren't much interested. That should trouble those who think scientists ought to read novels and novelists ought to read science. In fact, there's relatively little description of academics—it's hard to conclude much about what books are read and what papers are written. In any case, the essential curriculum lies elsewhere, in "basic skills" such as "expressing one's feelings honestly and taking the risk of being genuine with other people" or "learning to listen carefully to others, to be sensitive to the feelings underlying what other people are saying, and to be responsive to others in a consequent and honest manner" (pp.118-119). That's hardly the stuff of university admission boards, but Nemiroff would shrug and say the more's the pity.

Does it work? Are students better prepared for jobs or further schooling? There's simply no way to tell because no rigorous follow-up study has been done—nor is one likely to be done. To the charge that all this concentration on the individual takes away from academic study, Nemiroff responds that the time devoted to the bands "increases students' motivation to learn and to acquire academic and social skills, as well as their sense of responsibility to themselves and others" (p.137). That would be powerful if she could show it.

But there's nothing close to proof, except for a slim example of a dozen or so students in a university-level women's study class; they had grade averages of 84%, compared to 73% for students who chose not to join groups. That's bad science, even for social science, and fully deserves the scorn Nemiroff rightly had early in the book for "quantitative analysis, often highly speculative and based on a minuscule sample of subjects" (p.4). But the qualitative analysis the book offers makes it impossible to judge the success of the enterprise. Who can tell if better grades happened because of what the group gave to the students or what the students them-

selves were before joining the group? And despite anecdotes, and testimony about life **at** the New School, there's very little about life **after** it. If the place is doing its job, we should be seeing more humane and "empowered" lawyers and artists and plumbers. Maybe they are, maybe they're not.

If we can't say that they are better prepared, can we say that New School students are "happier," more "fulfilled" than students in traditional settings? Again, no. Nemiroff reproduces a number of student accounts of their time at the New School; most are certainly positive. She is also frank that the place isn't for everyone. But finally, there's no way of knowing who spoke and who chose not to speak. Once again, it's a matter of faith, another set of beliefs presenting itself as curriculum. Still, I was relieved that she offered no scales that would attach numbers to degrees of happiness, personal fulfillment, or life skills.

As for the writing, some structural tottering results from the book being simultaneously narrative, polemic, and scholarly exposition. For example, after several pages of general discussion about divorce, drugs, and other social ills, Nemiroff suddenly shifts to "many of our students aren't from these backgrounds." Then how was the previous discussion relevant? Similarly, there is disconcertingly frequent turning from theory to the New School and then back to theory—often in the same paragraph. One wishes that the rhetorical gears had been shifted more smoothly. Nor is this helped by prose that often joins self-help—speak and scholar-speak. Just one example: "The concept of the band under critical humanism always bears within it the dialectical model of mutually informing personal growth and personal and collective empowerment" (p.138).

The New School believes in human well-being, and what could be wrong with that? Of course, we'll never agree on what constitutes well-being or how students should learn it. I wouldn't send my kids there because I'm unsure how it would prepare them. I also think that personal growth is too important to leave to schools, new ones or otherwise. But that's my faith, and the New Schoolers have their own. Curriculum building, after all, is about belief and the political power to give it an incarnation. *Reconstructing Education* confirms those who already keep the faith, rather than make converts.

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