

# Critical Philosophy and Ethnography of Education (& coda)

Fall 2016

Tuesday/Thursday, 1:30-2:50

HV 100

## About the Instructor

Eli Thorkelson (ethorkel@whittier.edu)

Office: In the DigLibArts collaboratory, 1st floor of the library

Office Hours: Fridays 12-1pm

## Course Description

What is the meaning of being educated? How can educational institutions be so contradictory, combining systems of discipline with ideals of freedom and emancipation? How does education change in the face of globalization and digital technology? In this class, we will take an anthropological look at how education works in a range of global cultures and institutions. One part of the course will look critically at educational values and ideals, ranging from the French Enlightenment to the postcolonial era. A second part will be interactional, studying in fine detail at how ethnographers analyze power and language within the classroom. And a third part will be institutional, considering the rise of “neoliberalism” since the 1980s, the changing structure of social reproduction and the labor market. Students will also practice doing some of their own ethnographic fieldwork, centered on an educational setting of their own choosing, and will be asked to write about their own educational experiences.

## Required Books

*Available at the Whittier College Bookstore or for sale online:*

- Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton, *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*, Harvard University Press, 2013
- Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty Year Assault on the Middle Class*, Harvard University Press, 2008
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, Allan Bloom trans., Basic Books, 1979

## Requirements

The course requirements are not complicated:

- Participation and attendance (15%)
- In-class writing assignments (25%)
- 2 short papers (15% each)
- Final paper (30%)

To expand on this slightly:

**Participation and attendance** in class is required. This means that you should come to class each day in a reasonable state of consciousness, ready to talk about the week’s topic with your classmates. You should do the required readings and should bring them to class (in either electronic or paper format). You should also bring pen and paper to each class session.

Most weeks will have some sort of **in-class writing assignment**. Some of this will be autobiographical; some of this will allow you to reflect on the culture of Whittier College; and some of it will be about the readings. This will allow you to engage more deeply with the course material and to help us understand each other's views on education.

There will be **two short papers**, due respectively **October 11th** and **November 10th**. These papers will ask you to write a more detailed analysis of one of the course readings. I will provide more details on these papers as we move through the course. You will have an opportunity to revise these papers for a higher grade, if you wish.

A **final paper** will be due at the end of the class, asking you to reflect in more detail on a topic of your choice. I will work with you to help come up with a good topic.

## Course Policies

### Classroom Community

Each student in this class is expected to treat other students with respect and consideration regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, economic background, religion, age, ability, etc. Hate speech or other acts of targeted discriminatory speech will not be tolerated. Any student's behavior that intimidates or makes difficult the attendance of another student will be considered harassment. If you ever feel uncomfortable with a situation or a discussion that occurs before, during, or outside of class, please do not hesitate to talk to me, or, if you are not comfortable speaking with me, please talk to someone in the Office of Student Life or Counseling Services. Your best interests will always be respected in taking any action.

### Communications

If you have questions about the course, it's always good to come to my office hours. They are from 12-1pm on Fridays in my office in the library (next to the DigLibArts collaboratory).

The rest of the time, the best way to reach me is via email at [ethorkel@whittier.edu](mailto:ethorkel@whittier.edu). I'll normally respond within a day during the week, or on Monday if you get in touch over the weekend.

### Gadgets

In general, you are welcome to use whatever classroom technology you like. However, you are expected to remain fully engaged in our classroom activities, regardless of the lures of technology. I reserve the right to adjust this policy as the course goes on.

### Late Work

Late work is penalized 1/3 of a grade per day, and is not accepted after one week. Failure to complete any of the course requirements will result in a failing course grade of "F." If you know that you will be missing class, please notify me ahead of time so we can make alternate arrangements. If you fall ill or encounter some sort of emergency, notify me as soon as possible.

### Missing class

You are allowed **one** non-excused absence. After that (barring extenuating circumstances), your participation grade will be reduced for each additional absence.

## Harassment

Whittier College is dedicated to providing a safe and equitable learning environment for all students. Sexual misconduct, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, stalking, dating violence and domestic violence, is prohibited by the College. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the Title IX Coordinator, Cynthia Joseph, at 562-907-4830 or [cjoseph@whittier.edu](mailto:cjoseph@whittier.edu). For more information about reporting and prohibited conduct, please see the Sexual Misconduct Policy at [www.whittier.edu/smap](http://www.whittier.edu/smap).

## Accommodations

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal anti-discrimination statute that provides comprehensive civil rights protection for persons with disabilities. Among other things, this legislation requires that all students with disabilities be guaranteed a learning environment that provides for reasonable accommodation of their disabilities. If you believe you have a disability requiring an accommodation, please contact Disability Services, located on the ground floor of the Library, room G003, or by phone at (562) 907-4825.

## Academic integrity

It is expected that all of the work you do for this class will be original, or otherwise cited. Plagiarism will result in a failing grade on the plagiarized assignment and possible disciplinary action by the College. We will review the proper way to use outside sources in order to avoid plagiarism; however, I encourage you to meet with me or email me, if you are at all uncertain about where something like collaboration ends and plagiarism begins. If you are unsure about whether the work you are submitting is original, improperly cited, or plagiarized, consult with me, or with the institution's entire Academic Honesty Policy (at <http://www.whittier.edu/academics/academichonesty>).

## Course Schedule

### Week 1: Introduction

**September 8:** Overview of the course

*In-class writing assignment*

### Week 2: Philosophies of Education

**September 13:** "Traditional" Western Pedagogy

- Plato, *Republic*, Book 2 (<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1497/1497-h/1497-h.htm>)

Recommended:

- Jacques Verger, "Scholastic Pedagogy," "Knowledge and Authority: The Teacher's Image" and "The Place of Teachers in Medieval Society"

**September 15:** The Birth of Education

Jonathan Swift, *The Battle of the Books* (<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/623/623-h/623-h.htm>)

Recommended:

- Eli Meyerhoff, "Against Education"

### **Week 3: Enlightenment Pedagogy (I)**

**September 20:** Rousseau, *Emile*, Book 1

**September 22:** Rousseau, *Emile*, Book 2

### **Week 4: Enlightenment Pedagogy (II)**

**September 27:** Rousseau, *Emile*, Book 3

**September 29:** Rousseau, *Emile*, Book 5

### **Week 5: Feminist & Progressive Education**

**October 4:** A Retort to Rousseau

Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Chs. 1-2

**October 6:** U.S. progressivism

John Dewey, “The Democratic Conception in Education” (in *Democracy and Education*)

### **Week 6: Postcolonial and Liberation Pedagogy**

**October 11:** National Independence

- Donald Freeman, Rollie Kimbrough and Brother Zolili, “The Meaning of Education”
- Julius K. Nyerere, “Education for Self-Reliance”

*Assignment: First paper due by midnight*

**October 13:** Freire

Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Ch. 1-2.

### **Week 7: The Classroom**

**October 18:** Social Order

- Deborah Golden, “Structured Looseness: Everyday Social Order at an Israeli Kindergarten”
- Judith Kapferer, “Socialization and the Symbolic Order of the School”

**October 20:** Participatory Pedagogy

Johan Elvemo, Davydd Greenwood et al, “Participation, action, and research in the classroom”

### **Week 8: Social Reproduction On Campus (I)**

**October 25:**

*Paying for the Party*, Ch. 1 (“The Women”)

**October 27:**

*Paying for the Party*, Ch. 5 (“Socialites, Wannabes and Fit with the Party Pathway”)

## **Week 9: Social Reproduction On Campus (II)**

### **November 1:**

*Paying for the Party*, Ch. 6 (“Strivers, Creaming, and the Blocked Mobility Pathway”)

### **November 3:**

*Paying for the Party*, Ch. 7 (“Achievers, Underachievers, and the Professional Pathway”)

## **Week 10: Informal Education**

### **November 8:**

Loic Wacquant, “The social logic of sparring,” pp. 77-100, from *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*

### **November 10:**

Loic Wacquant. “An implicit and collective pedagogy,” pp. 100-127, from *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*.

*Assignment: Second paper due by midnight*

## **Week 11: Gender and Power**

### **November 15:** Gender and the Hidden Curriculum

C.J. Pascoe, “Becoming Mr. Cougar: Institutionalizing Heterosexuality and Masculinity at River High,” from *Dude, You’re a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*.

### **November 17:** NO CLASS

*AAA Meetings*

## **Week 12**

### **November 22:** Gender and the Hidden Curriculum

C.J. Pascoe, “Look at My Masculinity! Girls Who Act Like Boys” from *Dude, You’re a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*.

### **November 24:** NO CLASS

*Thanksgiving!*

## **Week 13: Public Higher Education (I)**

### **November 29:**

Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University*, Ch. 1

### **December 1:**

Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University*, Ch. 3

## Week 14: Public Higher Education (II)

### December 6:

Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University*, Ch. 5

### December 8: Conclusion

### Final paper

It will be due during exam week, on **Wednesday, December 14**.

## Assignments

### Paper 1

Choose any one of Rousseau's hypothetical teaching scenarios. Explain how Rousseau thought it would work and what it was supposed to teach Emile. Then describe at least three ways in which it could fail if tried in the real world.

You may wish to consider some of the following phenomena:

- Social contexts left unspecified (class, gender, etc)
- Hostile/complicated interpersonal dynamics that could emerge
- Differences between *what teachers expect students to learn* and *what students might actually take away*
- Whether Rousseau's larger pedagogical program would effectively be supported by the scenario in question
- Whether Rousseau's larger pedagogical program would be a good thing, even if it were successfully implemented.

Please write 4-5 pages and submit your paper on Moodle by midnight on October 11.

### Paper 2

For this assignment, write a two-part paper. The first part should consist of field observations; the second part should contain an analysis of the social order you observed.

#### Part 1

Do at least 30 minutes of field observation of some social situation at Whittier College. Bring a notebook and take notes about the people you see, their interactions, their relationships, and their norms and expectations. (If it is inconvenient to take notes on site, sit down immediately afterwards and write down what you can remember.) Public behavior is traditionally fair game for social researchers; if you do research in any sort of private situation, you should minimally notify the people involved that you are making observations for a class paper about education, and you should obtain their consent to observe them. (If this were formal research, you would need a more formal consent procedure as well.) The first part of your paper should just consist of your typed field observations (at least 1.5 pages).

#### Part 2

In the second part of your paper, connect what you observed to the larger social order. You might consider questions like: What was the underlying structure of the social situation you observed? Who was enforcing local norms? What happened to people who transgressed local rules or customs? How did people sort out interactionally ambiguous situations? How did they respond to unexpected events? Any other relevant considerations are also fair game here, and you are welcome to comment on broader aspects of Whittier's

campus culture as you understand it. This part of your paper should also be at least 1.5 pages (so 3 pages total).

The paper is due on Moodle by midnight on **Monday, November 14**.

### **Final Paper**

For your final assignment, write a 5-7 page paper describing an educational conflict of your choosing. You can choose a case from Whittier College, from California in general, or from any other setting of your choice. This is not a research paper per se; you should choose a case that you are already familiar with. Then write a three part paper:

1. Give a narrative description of the educational conflict in question. What happened? Who were the actors? What was the result? What was the historical background to the events?
2. Take a step back and describe the perspectives underlying different sides of the conflict. Did different parties have different theories of education? Was the conflict based on differences of class, race, gender, or other kinds of social positioning?
3. In a concluding section, pick your preferred side of the conflict in question and explain why you endorse its view. Explain how the view in question relates to your own theory of education and your own educational values.

If you have any questions about how to choose a topic for your paper, contact me by email and I will give suggestions. You should turn in your paper on Moodle by midnight on December 14th.

### **Closing Reflections**

*I wrote this as a final comment on the seminar as I taught it in 2016, and read it to the students on the last day of class.*

December 8, 2016

The aim of our class, speaking broadly, is to arrive at an anthropological understanding of education. This means having a sense of history and cultural difference; discovering race, gender and class-based cultures and inequities; and acquiring some new concepts to help make sense of the world around you. It means learning to redramatize education in a world where it has become too dull and banal, while also learning to see through educational hype when the value of education, as often occurs, is blown out of proportion. It means gaining a sense of how three large kinds of reality overlap in any given educational moment: the world of educational theory, the world of institutional practice, and the world of politics and social conflict.

The class, necessarily, has covered a lot of ground in a short period of time. There's a long distance between Plato's ideal society policed by warrior-sages, philosophers with the constitution of watchdogs, and Christopher Newfield's image of an America where economic growth has slowed, class lines have intensified, and public education has fallen into decline. If anything, the class shows us that there are things in education that just can't make sense, that are flatly contradictory: clashes between theory and reality, between the past and the present, between ideals and practical possibilities. Education should make you free but education constantly puts you down. Teachers can be inspiring role models, or they can be harsh, arbitrary and indifferent. College is a great investment (if everything works out), or it's a terrible investment (if you are broke and deep in debt).

To help us navigate these contradictions, I've focused on introducing us to some history, some ethnography, some philosophy, some politics. We hastily surveyed the development of Western and postcolonial educational theory, seeing how every theory of education, as Dewey emphasized, presupposes a theory of the society that goes with it. We looked at theories of education that are based on social stasis (Plato), on solitary self-development (Rousseau), on overcoming sexist prejudice (Wollstonecraft), on helping people to be good

democratic citizens (Dewey), or later, in the postcolonial moment, on providing liberatory education for the oppressed groups of the earth. Recall the argument of Donald Freeman, Rollie Kimbrough, and Brother Zolili:

Education must (1) teach Black People who they are, (2) teach Black People what they are fighting for, (3) teach Black People who they must identify with, (4) teach Black People where their loyalty must lie, (5) teach Black People what must be done to obtain what we are fighting for, (6) teach Black People how to do it, and (7) teach Black People that our the destinies of all Black People are inseparably linked whether we are in North, Central, or South America, the West Indies, Europe, Asia, or Africa.

It's interesting how much education here sounds exciting and urgent again, doesn't it? That's part of our agenda: to recover why people care about education, when so often they are forced into it.

But it's also about figuring out the world around us in all its flaws. The history of education is full of hidden social dynamics, which we've started to learn how to decode and name. We've talked about college *pathways* that set you on course for certain kinds of spouses, jobs, incomes, and class destinies. We've talked about the *banking model of education* that Freire criticized for making students into objects, passive receptacles of knowledge. We observed that only some parts of his criticism have really been dealt with in mainstream education: It's become common to do various kinds of active learning, but how often do we get rid of traditional forms of discipline, or with syllabi that the teachers primarily get to design, or with the presumption that students know less than their teachers? We talked about how education *governs your body*, gets into your reflexes and muscle memories. Education isn't just about your head. We talked about how schools have a *hidden curriculum*: for instance, they teach you how a "man" or "woman" is supposed to be, they tell you your place, who to love, who to admire, who to pursue, who to ostracize or call a "fag." We talked about what a *social order* is, how it ties you down, provides expectations that no one can entirely get out of, provides rules that you get punished for violating. We might dismiss Plato, but he was right about one thing: there is always a social order. It's our relationship to that order that's (somewhat) up for negotiation.

My thought would be that as long as you are connected to educational institutions, there's good reason to have more categories like these for making sense of what you are going through. I have to say, though, that I also had another agenda in our class that goes beyond simply understanding. Which was, frankly, to give you a chance to question education, to criticize it, to doubt classroom authority. The seminar ideal of our class is fundamentally egalitarian: we all know something, we all bring a missing piece to the table, we are all equals faced with the massive task of making sense out of a contradictory world. I may have been working on it longer than you have, but I can be the first to tell you, nothing in education is a settled issue. So the course has tried to develop tools and examine cases, rather than giving you something settled. Education ought to be unsettling: it ought to teach you to ask questions, not to provide you with answers. Studies show that you will mostly forget the answers if I do teach them.

Ultimately, I'd like to have figured out how to help you become more free, as human beings in a college environment that we all know to be highly constrained. I'll be honest: that remains a work in progress; some moments in our seminar were more successful than others. And I'll work on that in the future. But this sense of education for freedom was, in any case, the existential aspiration at the heart of this class. In that sense, there was something on the line for me here, probably more than usual.