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A Strange Way of Coming of Age:
Why the Higher Education Conversation Needs Anthropology

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Abstract

If anthropology still aims to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange, then what could be stranger than putting all humans through a series of disliked exercises for almost two decades as a condition for arriving at a minimal possibility of successful adulthood? Higher education is such familiar water to those of us swimming in this ocean that we rarely consider how very strange it is. In this paper I demonstrate how the holistic approach of anthropology is needed to comprehend the many peculiarities of our way of bringing people to adulthood. The paper situates the study of higher education firmly at the intersection of cross-cultural studies, biological and psychological studies of human development, knowledge about learning as embodied and social, and theories of motivation, drawing on a cultural reading of the discourse of higher education in the contemporary United States as well as ethnographic study of college.

Keywords: anthropology, childhood, education, adolescence, higher education, human development, personhood

All humans by nature desire to know.
Aristotle

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers; —
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
William Wordsworth

Strange: *adj.: unusual, extraordinary, or curious; odd, queer*
Dictionary.reference.com

A Missing Voice

If anthropology still aims to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange, then what could be stranger than putting all humans through a series of disliked exercises for almost two decades as a condition for arriving at a minimal possibility of successful adulthood? Higher education is such familiar water to those of us swimming in this ocean that we rarely consider how very strange it is.

By the year 2012, public discourse on education in general and higher education in particular has become an avalanche (Arum and Roksa 2011, Bok 2006, Christensen and Eyring 2011, Cronon 1998, Davidson 2011, Delbanco 2012, Denning 2011, Graff 2003, Grafton 2012, Hacker & Dreifus 2010, Hersh and Merrow 2005, Kamenetz 2010, Karabell 1998, Kerr 2001, Kronman 2007, Menand 2010, Nathan 2005, Riley 2011, Roche 2010, Rose 2009, Seaman 2005, Shapiro 2005, Smith 2009, Taylor 2010, Vedder 2004). As one who has tried to follow the public conversation, I have become buried under these snows. And yet, despite the shouts, murmurs, whispers, calls to arms, and other sundry sounds reverberating across the mountain peaks, one voice is notably missing.

This is the voice of anthropology.

Anthropologists have studied institutions such as law, medicine, religion, and "the family," including "socialization" and children. A robust field of the anthropology of education exists, focused mostly on earlier years of schooling (e.g. Spindler 1997). Now that "childhood"

or at least non-adulthood extends many more decades than in the past, higher education has to be included. But anthropological investigations of higher education should draw on the entire range of the field: Not only cultural anthropology, but also psychological anthropology, linguistic anthropology, and biological anthropology have revealed extensive insight about the person and self, about the kinds of communication involved in every human activity, about the roles of bodies and how they are perceived as both problems and possibilities. Education and schooling have everything to do, as well, with politics and economics. The academic study of psychology and education can tell us about development and learning. But only anthropology has the mandate to combine the physical, cognitive, social, affective, political, economic, moral, and ethical—and to include data about actual humans from varying backgrounds in this full context.

As Susan Bordo wrote in her brilliant *The Unbearable Weight* (1993), anorexia is "the crystallization of culture" in the sense that it is a disorder inevitable from the cultural makeup of our society. In the same sense, educational achievement crystallizes many US cultural values, from the nature of children and childhood, to folk theories of the stages of human development, to ideal notions of individual accomplishment and social responsibility.

An anthropology of childhood and education necessarily focuses on intersecting topics: personhood (Jung 2007), adulthood, theories of human nature, the human mind, and human society. When we see how people behave in higher education, it appears bizarre indeed.

*   *   *

The students face the teacher, virtual hands on their virtual hips.

"I dare you to make me care!"

"What do you want us to do on these papers?"

"How many pages does it have to be?"

"Can I revise this for a better grade?"

The professor laments to her colleagues, "All students want is the grade. They are not like students in my day, when we wanted to learn about the meaning of life."

The students lament to their friends, "The professor is so unreasonable. Doesn't she know how many other classes we're taking? And I have my job, and the fundraiser for orphans in Africa."

The public laments everywhere, "Higher education is a joke. Students get high grades for not learning anything except about binge drinking and hooking up. College is not worth the money. Professors have such a cushy life; they work six hours a week and have summers off, and they make $150,000."

*   *   *

Long Dependence… But How Long?

Children are born to learn. Indeed, they must learn after birth, unlike most other species, because they are born dependent and vulnerable (Gibbons 2008). Unlike most other primates, humans learn well after they are capable of production and reproduction (Bock 2010). Education, or what has classically been called "socialization" (Spindler 1997 [1967]), is central to the development of every human into a full-fledged member of her society, and it is necessary for psychological, social, and economic well-being. Schools, however, are a very recent invention, at least for the majority of human beings.

In the contemporary industrialized world people remain dependent until well into our second decade, though the contribution by children to subsistence and survival is variable and complicated (Baker and Panter-Brick 2000, Kramer 2005). We are, further, evolved to be part of social units, and one of the primary functions of social units is to prepare the young for their lives, and for their lives as members of each particular, specific society.

All societies must cope with the question of how to take our dependent, helpless young and turn them into the kinds of people valued by their own. Whether each society celebrates fierceness or gentleness, harmonious interaction or proud independence, its members largely become individuals who have learned how to do that. While the discredited Culture-and-Personality school over-emphasized uniformity within a society (e.g. Benedict 1934) and isomorphism between individual and larger ethos, there are nonetheless characteristics of societies as a whole that can be identified through observation (Marcus and Kitayama 1991). In the United States, and increasingly everywhere, a specific image is emerging of an ideal human, one that is docile in following regulations, adapted to classroom structures, and economically competitive.

Though some excavations of 13,000-year-old sites show novices practicing cave paintings, demonstrating that some sense of social learning was already in place (Davies 2011), it

is only in the last two centuries that something approaching universal, compulsory schooling has become common, spreading now into the entire world as a desired individual good. At the same time, schooling is often ineffective and indeed problematic. Critics regard the hegemony of conventional, compulsory education as damaging and misguided (Gatto 2005 [1992], Goodman 1962, 1964, Henry 1963, Holt 1982 [1964], 2004 [1976], Illich 1970).

Childhood

Views of childhood and of children vary enormously around the world and have varied remarkably throughout time (Ariès 1962 [1960], Heywood 2001, Lancy 2008, Levine and New 2008, Montgomery 2009, Stearns 2006). In the twenty-first century in the United States, we regard our infants as innocent at birth, and we acknowledge some degree of dependence until adolescence ends (now approximately thirty) (Arnett 2004, Schlegel and Barry 1991, etc.). David Lancy calls this the "cherub" view of early childhood. Forget the scandalous sex-obsessed Freud; our children are supposed to be pure (Zelizer 1994). At the same time, we acknowledge some degree of mischievousness, as in our beloved stories of naughty kids such as Huckleberry Finn. Once children hit puberty, and even more so in adolescence, we focus on the fact that they are at the mercy of hormones. The latest explanation for perceived misbehavior and risk-taking of children and teenagers is the continuing brain development until late adolescence (Spear 2000). Whether this expected troublesomeness is innate and inborn has been argued since Stanley Hall popularized the term *adolescence* and juvenile delinquency became perhaps the first "moral panic" (Cohen 2011, Hall 1904, Lesko 1996, Savage 2007). This was the ideal topic for Margaret Mead to investigate, in order to demonstrate Franz Boas's theories about the dominance of culture over nature (Mead 1961 [1928]).

The End of Childhood: Adolescence and Adulthood

"Human development" is often a universalizing discourse based on studying middle-class white US college students. It is evident that anthropology brings in an entirely different context for this conversation. The end of adolescence and the beginning of adulthood are typically measured by financial and emotional independence, establishment of a new household, a job, marriage, and a family. These signposts smuggle in a large number of culturally specific presuppositions: heteronormativity; an independent self as the ideal (in contrast to an interdependent self);

economic possibilities of neolocalism; and more. Studies of contemporary US and western European adolescents note with surprise (because they set this as the question to be explained) their return to their parents' homes; in an anthropological perspective the surprise could instead be that very young adults should be on their own at all. The shock that Clifford Geertz alerted us to in the 1970s in his "From the Native's Point of View" has been freshly discovered by psychologists: studying US college students gives us knowledge only of WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) humans, not of all humans (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010; Johnson 2010; see also Geertz 1974, Markus and Kitayama 1991, Spiro 1993). Yet a newer universalism, bolstered by studies of fMRI and hormones, still studies principally western youth, who are themselves shaped by this same system (PBS 2002, Rees 2010). Melford Spiro's 1993 critique pointed out that it was difficult to assess whether this "western" person was peculiar, because little research had been done up to that date. Taking his challenge to heart, two decades on, availing ourselves of rich research, I will claim that our system of raising up adults via formal schooling is indeed, in the context of human history and variation, strange.

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When I ask my students whether they are adults, they are uncertain. Not now. Not yet. They distinguish students, "kids," from "full-grown adults," at least at my traditional residential college. They refer to each other as *boys* and *girls* and *kids*, though *guys* is better than *boys* most of the time. Sometime later they will become untethered to their parents' cell phone plans, but I've met married graduate students in their 30s still covered by their parents' plans. It is cheaper, they matter–of–factly state, to keep them on.

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The Role of Schooling in Education

In the midst of this version of childhood, formal schooling plays an enormous role. In fact, children (however defined) spend almost all their most productive and waking hours in schools of one sort or another from early childhood until… some end point, ever retreating.

Here are some of the assumptions that can be examined, and that may be different in different societies and at different historical moments:

- College students are children, to be overseen (consciously using the vocabulary of slavery).

- Teachers are the central figures in classrooms; they should be resisted (Scott 1985).

- "Knowledge" is pre-known and packaged, with a sequence that can be determined in advance. Goals are externally and (anticipatorily) generated in advance, and the task is to meet those goals.

- Time is fragmented, divided industrially (Gatto 2005 [1992], Thompson 1967).

- Efficiency is desirable because schooling is made up of tasks.

- Disconnection from the world is a virtue (school walls, school rules—no gum, no hats, no cell phones, college gates).

- Bodily comportment must be carefully crafted (Bourdieu 1977, Foucault 1977, 1978).

- Individual learning is the primary measure.

- "Independence" and "originality" are the currency.

- Total amount of "work" is regarded as a measure of worth (Arum and Roksa 2011).

In claiming that the twenty-first century US education system, and especially higher education, as well as the experience of growing up is rather strange, in the cultural and historical context of human experience, I could point to the aims for independence, acquisition, competition, and a two-decades-long endurance test that provides unsought-for knowledge and unused information. I could point out that our education system creates a childhood and emerging adulthood with….

- Adult–free zones (Hersch 1998, Moffatt 1989, Seaman 2005);

- Age segregation (Chudacoff 1989);

- Dislike of product offered: tug of war between faculty (more!) and students (less!) (Labaree 2010: 138);

- Boasting about how little is done and learned: "I forgot everything"; "It's a great class—easy grading and you don't have to go to class!";

- Desirability of swift dispatch of requirements ("Dean Dad" 2010), yet kids are desperate to get into the college;

- Repression, not even channeling, of younger children's energy (cf. Shlaes 2011);

- Inculcation of passivity: College students can serve as camp counselors, tutors. They can organize events, build houses, etc. But in college classes they are trained into passivity:

> *What do you want?* Students arrive in class and wait for the signal: *Start!* Turn on a
> spigot; turn it off to move to the next class;

- Much learning with relevance only in school, such as citation conventions (Blum 2009);
- Criminalization of cooperation and collaboration: We recognize that in "the real world" cooperation is good, but in school we criminalize and regard as immoral collaboration during tests: in this sense we impose artificial constraints on students' resources. (See for example definitions of "academic integrity" that emphasize solitary work [International Center for Academic Integrity 2012] but see Vega and Terada 2012);
- Irrelevant measures of "outcomes": tests of easily measurable, trivial material, such as in SAT scores; admission statistics with regard to higher education; at liberal arts colleges one calculation of worth is the percentage of students going to graduate school (How many positions are there awaiting more PhDs?).

Anthropology can provide examples from around the world that challenge almost every assumption built into our sense of *schooling for two decades before real responsibility*. Evidence lies in the areas of childhood–adolescence–adulthood as well as learning–socialization–education–schooling.

Anthropologists and other scholars have convincingly and repeatedly shown that:

- Humans learn easily and naturally, often without teaching (Bruner, Olver, and Greenfield 1966, Gaskins 2008, Lancy n.d., Pelissier 1991).
- Trying and failing is how we learn (Ambrose et al. 2010).
- We learn somatically, kinesthetically (See, e.g., Belhiah 2009, Rapport 2005, Sobo this collection, Woodard 2009).
- We learn socially, jointly (Enfield & Levinson 2006, Lave and Wenger 1991). This is seen most clearly in the fact that language must be learned through consequential interaction: for example, research with hearing children of deaf parents who were set in front of TVs to learn to speak, did not learn (Sachs, Bard, and Johnson 1981).
- Repetition, chanting, and rote learning are common (Moore 2006).
- Learning by unsupervised observation is common (Gaskins 2008).

- Apprenticeship is common and often involves little active teaching (Briggs 1986, Greenfield 2004, Herzog this collection, Lancy 1980, Lave 1982, Lave and Wenger 1991, Rogoff 1990, 2011).

- Novices and experts often have a complementary division of labor (Greenfield 2004, Rogoff 2003, 2011).

- Often multi-age groups socialize the young (Lancy n.d.).

- Many young people have genuine responsibility, unlike in the US where "your job is to go to school" or "play is the work of children" (E.g. Child Development Institute 2012, but see Gaskins 2008, Lancy 2008, Rogoff 2003, Zelizer 1994).

- Puberty and sexuality are the absorbing task of people between 12 and 25; sexuality must everywhere be controlled (Bogle 2008, Schlegel and Barry 1991).

- Extrinsic motivation destroys intrinsic motivation (Deci 1971, Egan 2007, Kohn 1993, 2011, Pink 2009, Ryan and Deci 2000).

In the remainder of this article I expand on six especially strange phenomena in higher education:

1) Deferral and Abstraction: Absence of genuine responsibility and use (in contrast to apprenticeship and vocational education), and storage;

2) Isolation: Growing up at school, away from the grownups;

3) Opposition: Contradictory goals between faculty and students, and resistance;

4) Credentials and credits: Moving humans through the machine;

5) Motivation: Grades as key symbols; and

6) Performance: Majoring in impression management and finding alienation.

Methodologically I am drawing on a reading of social texts, of interviews, of participant observation as member of society, as professor, and as parent. Most of my stories come from unanticipated observations as one who spends most of my daytime hours in a college, though I have also, with the help of a series of student interviewers, conducted hundreds of interviews with undergraduates for more than 8 years (see Blum 2009). See Appendix for a sample. Yet while specific events and locations are powerful providers of evidence, we must consider not only local and particular events but also the context and the recurring events that have formed

and shaped the current moment. Some of my material derives from specific ethnographies but my goal is to take a broader view than is possible by focus on a single site, or even multiple sites. I unite the micro and macro views to create a Critical Anthropology, if not necessarily an Ethnography.

(1) Deferral and Abstraction: Absence of genuine responsibility and use
(in contrast to apprenticeship and vocational education), and storage

Middle-class children in North America, whose families can afford it, are given little genuine responsibility. They may be told that "school is your job" or they may have babysitting or lawn mowing tasks, but mostly they spend their waking hours, the bulk of their days, in school. Anthropologists such as David Lancy 2010, Suzanne Gaskins 2008, and Barbara Rogoff 1990, 2003, write about the responsibility entrusted to very young children in other societies (see Lancy 2008: 234-271). Four-year-olds can tend fires, six-year-olds watch babies, three-year-olds use machetes, seven-year-olds herd sheep, and eight-year-olds cook dinner for the family. Discussions of "child work" and "child labor" may challenge the appropriateness of these and other burdens (making carpets, selling trinkets, begging, sex work), but in many societies children at a very young age shoulder genuine responsibilities. (This is true in the US in less-advantaged families.)

The US imposes strict limitations on teenage employment (except for agricultural work), on the theory that school is more important than work, and that too much work would interfere with school. When one of my daughters wanted to work at a summer camp when she was fifteen, we had to get permission from the school district.

Those with economic hardship—a significant part of the population, to be sure—may work informally, and may be doing some of the same tasks mentioned above. But the ideal for those who can afford it is to be free of such labor.

By the time students are in college, they have heard the outside message that classes and studying are preferable to actual work, though many students, such as the working adults I taught at an urban university, are forced by circumstances to see it the other way. Work for them is real, consequential, absorbing, while classes appear (to many) as an irrelevant interruption. Those preparing for concrete work, in contrast to the ones free to study abstraction (and complain about

it), are often pitied (Crawford 2009, Rose 2004, Sennett 2008), though the tide may be turning on that (Klein 2012)—or the pendulum swinging back.

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In *To Kill a Mockingbird* the precocious narrator, Scout, who could read the newspaper before she started school, was reprimanded by her inexperienced first-grade teacher.

> *Miss Caroline told me to tell my father not to teach me any more, it would interfere with my reading…. "Now you tell your father not to teach you any more. It's best to begin reading with a fresh mind." (Lee 1999 [1960]: 19)*

This ludicrous emphasis of school over learning epitomizes the dilemma of a whole series of learning-for-schooling activities, from compare-and-contrast writing exercises to mastery of arcane grading scales to a certain kind of pretense that teenagers can and must contribute original knowledge and interpretation in their class writings.

The value of the *abstract* over the *concrete* has a specific history in connection with the triumph of *academic* over *vocational* education in the twentieth century (Collins 1979). This is visible as a focus on theory—quite rare worldwide (Pelissier 1991, but see Gladwin 1970)—or what Paolo Freire calls the "banking" method: putting knowledge away for use at some unspecified time in the future (Freire 2000 [1970]). In most other settings, people learn by doing; learn as needed; or learn in practice (Chick 2010, Gladwin 1970, Lancy 1980, Lancy, Bock, and Gaskins 2010, Lave 1982, 1988).

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(2) Isolation: Growing Up at School, Away From the Grownups

Many works concerned with high school and college focus on the social and developmental aspects of the experience, but a striking consistency is age segregation and the virtual lack of adults—aside from those annoying and demanding teachers—intruding on their peer interactions (Hersch 1998, Holland and Eisenhart 1990, Moffatt 1989, Nathan 2005, Seaman 2005). How many college faculty visit their students' dorms? This freedom from adult interference usually began in high school, if not earlier, and stems in part from a folk belief that teenagers naturally dislike and fear adults. (It also resonates with American cultural values of individualism and freedom [Bellah et al. 1985]).

Experts on learning focus on the classroom, and many academic leaders lament the difficulty of trying to bring learning (academic learning) into the dormitory, by having lectures or book discussions, films with analysis, in residence halls.

Entire branches of academic administration, "residence life," are concerned about the non-academic part of traditional, residential colleges, which aim to marry concerns about growing up with those about learning some kind of content. A war is underway in which college is seen to provide, ideally, practical vocational outcomes in contrast to lifelong and characterological gains. The defensiveness of liberal arts colleges reveals their weakness in this fight (ACLS 2005).

While at earlier levels of education we find treatments of "the whole person" such as in the progressive early childhood education studied in part by anthropologists (Edwards this collection, Sobo this collection, Tobin et al. 1989, 2009), and there are a handful of works that demonstrate the kind of person being shaped by education itself in junior and senior high school (Demerath 2009, Jung 2007), in early childhood the "development" angle is clearer. Those who study college may focus on sexuality, the role of alcohol, or moral development. Some such as psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett talk about higher education but in a black box fashion, as if higher education has no specific role to play in this development, and as if it is all so natural that it doesn't warrant examination. But warrant examination it does!

(3) Opposition: Contradictory goals between faculty and students, and resistance

In Spring 2012 in my linguistic anthropology class, I assigned two "Controversies," each with some groups presenting in class and others on the web. Because I had different numbers of topics in the two events, two groups of students who had done their first presentation in class had to do in-class debates as well.

I asked for volunteers from the six groups for one additional group, since one group indicated in the sign-in sheet that they would be flexible about the format. (Her angry group-mates clarified later that this was a mistake.)

Nobody volunteered. They told me I had to *make* them do it in class.

So I picked a group, randomly. And then we had a long talk.

"Why don't you want to do an in-class debate?" I had assigned this for many years and had received no complaints. That didn't mean they weren't complaining behind the scenes, of

course. I walk around campus and always hear students saying things like, "We have a stupid project" or "I hate that class." In my linguistic anthropology class students record, transcribe, and analyze casual conversations, and many of them include disparaging comments about faculty and classes. So previous lack of complaint in previous years cannot be proof that the debates were accepted.

But this class gave me an earful:

It takes more time.

We have to practice more.

It's not just a case of collecting information, which we could do quickly, but of preparing the debates.

We might have an off-day (and not perform well).

We don't know which side we will get, and it is frightening.

We might have to present a case we don't believe in.

We have not been studying debate techniques and will not have a chance to do it again, and won't improve. (So let's not bother?)

I gave them my reasons: There is an inverse relationship between "efficiency" and learning. Working with others verbally makes material sink in; social interaction makes it more long-lasting. Having to learn about both sides makes them take seriously arguments that they might otherwise just dismiss out of hand. It is more effective for the rest of the class to watch a live embodied debate than to skim a website.

Though we intersected at that moment, my goals are not theirs. But it is wrong to regard this interaction as simply that between an individual professor and a collection of several dozen young adults. Each of us comes with a past, with experience, with dreams and hopes and expectations, and though we live in the same society, there are conflicting forces operating. The past of our students includes every moment and every year leading up to the encounter. And I would argue that when we think carefully about all the messages that are being conveyed to young adults, they are responding appropriately when they aim to be efficient, to cut corners, to cheat, to get by, to coast, skate, and soar through the dutiful parts of college (the broccoli; studying, papers, tests) and get to the fun (the dessert; friends, sports, recreation).

Higher education in the US, as everywhere, is complicated. In the US it is a huge multi-billion-dollar business. More than 15 million people are students in this set of systems. We find

everything from online courses without credit, to the perplexing combination of high school/college credit courses, to community colleges (46% of undergraduates), to huge state universities to the tiny fraction attending small elite liberal arts colleges (see ACLS 2005). Most students are not at Harvard or Stanford or Williams. They are at Local State U or City Community College. Most are not preparing to be professors, researchers, academics; they hope to find some kind of job, and people told them they have to go to college to make that possible.

So here they are.

There are great differences between the contemporary university and that model, the nineteenth-century research university in Germany, where for the first time the crucial goal of the university was not merely the mastery of accumulated knowledge but the generation of new knowledge (Ash 1997, Röhrs 1995). For that, freedom and solitude were needed. (The medieval and British universities were more focused on transmission of knowledge than on scientific or artistic creation.) We have retained the conceit of "research" as something that all students must master, as in the "research paper," when a more appropriate concern might be "learning." "Research" glorifies it to the point of absurdity, a level that is not shared by students elsewhere. For instance, in China it is not expected that college students would make original, innovative contributions to knowledge. "Research" has been fetishized in the US educational system in terms of UROP grants, student theses, and the like. All this is an effort to get students to care about, to engage with, to be transformed by their education because this is not the case.

Students are "academically adrift" (Arum and Roksa 2011) where the currency is "effort" and "outcomes." They are in school to party, to get credentials, to get through it. There is learning and it can be transformative, but so can almost anything at that period in students' lives. A first job can be transformative. A first relationship. A performance in a play.

Elsewhere I have written about the mismatch between student, faculty, and public goals for higher education (Blum 2009, 2012), but here I will point out the obvious fact that faculty want *more* from students and students want *less*, bolstered by cultural virtues of "efficiency" and Return on Investment. Many students exhibit all the characteristics of an oppressed population: sabotage, foot-dragging, false compliance, dissimulation, and more (Scott 1985). In this context, plagiarism, cheating, and defiance, not to mention jokes and vengeance (ever look at Rate My Professor?), make sense.

(4) Credentials and Credits: Moving Humans Through the Machine

Credentials are so dominant that real-world experience is not real until it is awarded credit, as internships, or now even other kinds of experience. Now people can get double credit for high school and "early college," and for "life experience," called "Prior Learning Assessment" (Fain 2012).

Just as people can't really appreciate experience until it is photographed or posted on Facebook or Twitter, and a person is especially worthy once she appears on TV, so credentials make somehow real and legitimate what should otherwise be better evidence of ability (cf. Baudrillard's simulacrum).

Our system of "credits" began when the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching wanted a uniform measure of school learning, in which comparable units could be replaced. They are sometimes called "Carnegie units" (Labaree 2010: 98): measurable learning is prefigured.

The aim is uniformity, modeled on factory production, with assumed identical "input" subjected to uniform transformations, and the "outcomes" compared and assessed, just like in the production of steel.

The Bologna Process in Europe is an attempt to impose uniform, modular units—from the US model—onto a system that formerly simply assessed whether students' learning was adequate (European Higher Education Area 2010). Previously, for instance, German students studied until they were in a position to write their theses (Hofstetter 2001). Now, like their US counterparts, they must complete a certain number of credits.

Economists have written about higher education as possessing a "signaling" function (Arkes 1990, Heywood and Wei 2004, Spence 1973). Instead of employers themselves having to assess the value and quality of the person applying for employment, they take the degree as a signal of the person's ability to function at a high level. It also signals social capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990 [1970]).

But the focus on credits and credentials completely overtakes any focus on substance (Collins 1979).

(5) Motivation: Grades as Key Symbols

Student: "What do you want?"

Student: "What do I have to do to get a 'good grade'?" (This is a euphemism for an A, nowadays, at a highly selective college. A decade ago B+ was the default grade, but it has risen.)

Faculty often lament students' focus on grades, urging them to "learn for learning's sake," but despite the obvious practical "need" for high grades in some cases, what we see is a conflict between what psychologists call "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" motivation. When extrinsic motives become central and dominant, they give the message: you are doing something inherently undesirable to get something you desire more.

Robust research going back more than four decades shows that learning and well-being derive from genuine, intrinsic motivation (Czikszentmihalyi 1990, Deci 1971, Kohn 1993, Noddings 2003, Pink 2009, Ryan and Deci 2000). Focus on extrinsic motivation—achievement, success, GPA, approval—leads to alienation, a separation between the self and the exterior (Laing 1969), as it becomes primary to please the other, to respond to their demands, to await instruction. Despite claims that educators wish our students to become life-long learners, the structure we have with its focus on external motivations trains them to repress individual desire or curiosity.

I have proposed (Blum 2011) regarding grades as "key symbols" in Sherry Ortner's classic formulation (1973), as they represent a disproportionate and elaborated amount of attention.

(1) The natives tell us that *[grades are]* culturally important.

(2) The natives seem positively or negatively aroused about *[grades]*, rather than indifferent.

(3) *[Grades come up]* in many different contexts. These contexts may be behavioral or systemic: *[Grades come up]* in many different kinds of action situation or conversation, or *[grades come up]* in many different symbolic domains (myth, ritual, art, formal rhetoric, etc.).

(4) There is greater cultural elaboration surrounding *[grades]*, e.g., elaboration of vocabulary, or elaboration of details of *[grades']* nature, compared with similar phenomena in the culture. *[Think: statistics about GAP!]*

(5) There are greater cultural restrictions surrounding *[grades]*, either in sheer number of

rules, or severity of sanctions regarding its misuse. (Ortner 1973: 1339)

In this sense, reproaching students for their grade focus is doomed to be ineffective, given the many causes and ramifications grades possess in our formal schooling. It is as if trying to eradicate kudzu from the American South with a spray of hot water: the invasive species simply crowds out all competitors and grows, unstoppable.

(6) Performance: Majoring in Impression Management and Finding Alienation

One of the oddest aspects of the self inculcated so effectively in the best schools is that of impressions management (Goffman 1959). Schooling teaches us to perform for others and to respond to whatever arbitrary commands are issued, and to appear to perform those commands avidly, while resenting and resisting, creating what I call "the performance self" (Blum 2009). John Taylor Gatto writes of how students must learn to jump when the teacher says to jump (2005 [1992]). Peter Demerath (2009) describes students so skilled at working the system that they, with the complicity of the staff and families, earned extra credit for dubious work and were able to get exemptions for a variety of alleged disabilities. Denise Clark Pope (2001) writes of a girl who did homework for a different class but raised her hand without fail every ten minutes in order to ensure that she "participated" in class. One of my nieces, a graduate of a top-rated state university and now in medical school, told me that she raised her hand exactly twice each class so she could earn the maximum "participation" grade. Students at "the best" schools learn to please the most.

There is a convergence, as Shirley Brice Health (1982) showed so effectively, between upper-middle-class norms and the goals of schooling, accounting in large part for the almost-perfect correlation between SAT scores and socioeconomic status. Nonetheless we have a social ideology of "opportunity," as if some nineteenth-century notion of "genius" still lurked, a diamond in the rough to be discovered by the grinding polish of testing…more testing…still more testing. And once in a while a "genius" comes from the projects, justifying this oppressive punishment inflicted on all children (Kozol 2005, Ravitch 2010). While underprivileged students face enormous difficulties, the picture of life for privileged high school students—the ones who arrive at the best colleges—is nothing short of horrific: a grueling marathon of school, clubs, athletics, travel teams, band camp, fundraisers, two-a-days, tests and test prep and tutoring,

academic summer camps (Demerath 2009, Labaree 1997, Levine 2006, Pope 2001, Robbins 2006) with the complicity of teachers, administrators, parents, counselors. All this is aimed at a single test—college admissions. In comparison, the elaborate adolescent rites of passage such as recounted by Joseph Kett (1977), Margaret Mead (2001 [1928]), and Simon Ottenberg (1989) appear humane in their brevity and sober in their use of resources. The human and economic costs of our system are staggering.

There has been a century-long US debate pitting "progressive" education against traditional education and emphasizing "the whole child" over a narrow view of curriculum (Dewey 1966, Freire 2000 [1970], Holt 2004[1976], Neill 1960). Critiques abound (e.g. Freire 2000 [1970]) of the "banking" model of education, in which huge amounts of arbitrary, unrelated, and unbidden information is stored until "someday." But in even what passes for progressive education these days we find a focus on mastery of impression management.

The current system promotes a false self, in which appearances matter, pleasing the teacher is all-consuming, and students rarely are permitted time to acknowledge their own desires for learning or curiosity, which must be submerged in order to complete the pre-established curriculum. This has a two-fold cost: lack of meaningful learning and alienation. Compare this to someone learning to manage the sheep: there is no fooling or pretending to master the system. If you fail, you lose your sheep, and your family might starve.

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *</p>

One spring day as I walked back to my office from class, I heard a young woman say to her friend, "When I apply for a job no one will ask which position I had on the boat. I did it to boost my résumé." Clearly she was coming to terms with disappointment at failing to secure a prominent position, but what was so interesting to me was the stated justification. It had a single, frankly expressed purpose: making her look good on her résumé. She said it in such a matter-of-fact way that I knew she saw nothing wrong with it. Confessions of wrong-doing are often sheepishly preceded by something like, "I'm not gonna lie but…" but this statement needed no apology. Of course résumé-building was a perfectly ordinary reason to take up an activity, even if she was not a significant star on her team. Her point was that she didn't really care about her position, because

she didn't care about the activity itself. We see this regularly as students sign up for our classes to fulfill requirements, get credits, on their path toward their credential.

*   *   *

Coming of Age Elsewhere

Given that humans are adapted for flexibility, on what basis might I claim that the current US system is "strange"? I resist using the "Environment of Evolutionary Adaptedness" (Bowlby 1982) to dictate the optimal human way of coming of age, invoking hunter-gatherers as the ideal model (e.g. Foley 2005), for people are completely culturally shaped as young adults. If there is any nature of humans, it is our flexibility. Still, bolstered by Edgerton's book *Sick Societies* (1992), I would like to suggest that we can look at "outcomes" of various systems and make pointed observations, and in some cases observe societies that push people beyond what is tolerable or healthy. Clearly we cannot control, in an experimental sense, for single variables. But we can look cross-culturally at what happens during the eighteen- to twenty-two-year-old range. For many worldwide and for much of human history and prehistory, we find people this age engaged in

- Military service
- Marriage
- Childbirth
- Work (also differs according to social class)
- Apprenticeship

We find variation in the age of majority, both legal (voting, military) and actual (e.g. drinking). We find them living in a variety of situations:

- Longhouses
- With family, however defined
- Neolocal arrangements
- Dormitories at work, as in Foxconn factories in China
- Boarding houses (nineteenth-century maids, nineteenth-century German university students [Hart 1874))

It is useful to bring in knowledge of other cultures for comparison. For example, South Korea (Seth 2002), now with almost universal higher education, and China, with rapidly increasing participation and longstanding high-stakes testing (Blum n.d., Fong 2011, Kipnis 2011, Suen and Yu 2006, Zhao 2009), may be compared on a number of fronts. In Israel, with its universal military service, coming of age and college are distinct (Mayseless & Scharf 2003). Finland (Carey 2009, Compton 2011) and Germany (Ash 1997) with their support for vocational education and polytechnics can reveal consequences of providing both concrete and abstract education. Ronald Dore (1976, 1980) looks across cultures at what he calls "the diploma disease." Cynthia Lloyd (2005) looks at coming of age cross culturally.

When we see the expense, now lifelong with student debt (and the question of whether the debt outlives the student), the anxiety before college, the mental illness during it, we may not conclude that this approach is ideal or optimal. It may seem strange.

Appendix

Transcript from a random interview

The view of college as a sanctioned, desirable, and gated activity is very bizarre. I opened an interview literally at random; it was one that happened to be on my computer desktop.

You will notice the complicity between the interviewer and the interviewee, the easy assumed understanding of "pregaming" (drinking in their rooms prior to going out) and "by weekend you mean going out and like enjoying myself" and all the rest. This student intersperses excursions with studying, ends up sleeping only after 4 am. She adds *like* to indicate that she recognizes "enjoying myself" as a kind of euphemism, because getting drunk is not that enjoyable, in fact.

All the public discourse about higher education focuses on the economics; the value of the education; the fun. But it rarely puts it together.

And notice how writing assignments figure into the life and selfhood of the students.

Interviewer: Okay! So you begin…um, can you tell me about, can you run me through your day yesterday?

Subject: Yesterday. Okay…you want me to start at midnight or waking up?

I: Um…start at waking up.

S: Yesterday was Tuesday, I had…running on a little less sleep than usual, I was up till almost like 3 Monday night…

I: Could you speak up a little?

S: I'm sorry. I was up till 3 on Monday night.

I: Oh, Okay.

S: Um, then I woke up…

I: Wait, why, why were you up until 3?

S: Um, a friend of mine was studying…actually on Sunday, my friends and I decided we were going to go to Michigan City, to the dunes…

I: Okay.

S: Um, and our 4 hour excursion turned into an 8 hour excursion and we got back at 8:00, so I was working until 4…

I: Okay.

S: Um, and that just put me backed up on work for the week.

I: Oh.

S: And so Monday night I was trying to work ahead so that I could work on a paper on
Tuesday…but, so, I got up I'd say at about 10 on Tuesday

I: Uh huh.

S: Um, I had a 10:30 meeting with one of my advisors Dr. [Buttigieg?] …um we discussed a
research idea that I had had Sunday night to research behavioral economics, um, and their
rationality in the distribution of funds to nonprofits and charitable organizations. He was
really excited and helped out with networking, that was till about 11:30, I went back to
my dorm at that point and um, finished reading an article, uh, for my PBE class,
regarding political philosophy…I don't know how detailed I'm supposed to be, but…

I: As detailed as you feel necessary.

S: …a MacIntyre article called The Privatization of the Good…um, I went to lunch…I did…I
think I ate lunch. I hope I ate lunch.

I: Okay.

S: If I did, it was with my roommates. Got back…Yeah, I did. I went to lunch with my
roommates. Got back, finished reading the article, um…a student from my high school
who…of dubious moral character, needed, uh, needed to copy some answers for stats so I
showed up about 15 minutes early to stats, um, and made fun of him for not having done
the stats homework. Felt bad because he's a PLS major, but not that bad. Um…

I: Do you…frequently…allow this student to copy your homework?

S: Um, I try and explain to him. I figure it'll get him at the test.

I: Oh.

S: I'm not gonna sit down with him for six hours and explain everything he didn't understand
before the test, but…

I: Mhmm.

S: Um, it ended up being we checked our answers and he had come to some conclusion because I
hadn't wanted to meet with him at some obscene hour of the night before, or before he
had done anything. Um…so, after my statistics course, um, I went to 5:00 Mass because
it was a holy day of obligation

I: Uh-huh.

S: Uh, it was a fast mass, which was much, much appreciated. Uh…had a 6:00 meeting regarding applying for an SLA grant, which is a summer language abroad grant. It lasted about 6 to 7, it was uh, regarding just the particulars of applying to that program. Um…went back to my, back to my, back and met up, uh, with some of my roommates for dinner, uh, tried to eat as quickly as I could, um…wrote a 1 page response to another student's paper about, um, about the MacIntyre political theory article from about, I'd say I got started on it at about 8, uh, wasn't terribly productive, making fun of my roommates until about 8:15, and was done with that paper by 9:30…uh, met up with another student in the library to begin working on a theology paper, um…discussed sort of…shared resources with him in the library going, uh, looking at various biblical commentaries together, uh, wasn't terribly productive, 'cause a friend of mine was texting me way too much. Um but so was doing research for that paper from about 10 to 12, uh, got more involved substantively writing the paper, um, and wrote that paper from 12 to 2 pretty solidly, took a break from 2 to 2:30 cause the library closed, and finished that paper, um, almost completely finished the paper from about 12:30 to 4:15. At which point I went home, uh, and looked over a friend of mine's 1 page paper on, um, on the MacIntyre article cause he had looked at mine. I emailed it to him earlier in the evening.

I: Wait, *when* did you go to bed?

S: Um, four thirty-something, last night.

I: Ok, is this a typical day?

S: It's been a bad week, um…this is, I'd say it's atypical, I'm normally able to better schedule myself.

I: Uh-huh.

S: But…this happens. This is a….

I: Um, so how often do you venture off-campus?

S: Um…

I: You said you went to the dunes. Like, how often do you…

S: Sure, uh, this…off-campus for any purpose?

I: Or, um, I guess like, for an extended amount of time, like you did.

S: Oh, um…. This weekend I went off-campus Saturday night for various social gatherings which I'm guessing maybe you're not as interested in…

I: No no no no….yeah yeah.

S: Ok!

I: Yes.[laugh]

S: Barunie wants to know about my social life.

I: Yes! I do.

S: Um, hmm. Friday night we stayed on campus because we have an affiliation with Halloween and calling our room a pumpkin patch…um, and then Saturday night, um, after…after the…there was a game this weekend. After the game, um, we went to a party at a sports team house and at a house of former residents of our dormitory and so…

I: Was this a baseball house?

S: No, we went to Rugby House.

I: Oh.

S: And then we went to [Kingdom?] House.

I: Oh.

S: And so I'd say we were off-campus from about 10:30 to 11…to about 2:30 to 3.

I: Okay.

S: At which point we went home and…

I: So do you…

S: …shenanigans went to bed…Um then, Sunday we woke up I'd say at about 11 to 11:30, uh, got breakfast, brunch in the dining hall and then, uh, 2 of my roommates and I drove to, over to Michigan City um, for the stated purpose of one of them had too many holes in his jeans and he needed some more uh but then decided once we were there we might as well go to the dunes.

I: Mhmm.

S: And so, spent about 2 hours figuring out, um, one of my roommates' fashion problems, and then about 3 hours at the dunes just running around, and then went to dinner and drove back to campus. So about 12 to 8. There's the time change that I don't know how it worked

I: Yeah. Um, when you go off campus for parties,

S: Mhmm.

I: Uh, do you normally go before or after parietals?

S: Uh, normally before. Normally we, uh, most of 'em we go on weekends, so trying to get there, we say at about 11.

I: Okay.

S: The idea, we don't…I mean, we pregame parties but uh…we don't think it's all that fun to be in our rooms from the hours of like…we might go to a couple on-campus and say hi to friends beforehand, but spending more than two hours if you're trying to get eventually to an off-campus party, at various dorms drinking is just not as much fun or anything.

I: Okay.

S: _____ I guess I can only speak for myself. But…

I: Okay, so, it sounds like, um, during the weekday you spend most of your time…doing homework?

S: Yes. It's the most…or attending class.

I: Mhmm.

S: Going to meetings. Occasionally, I don't know, I'm very heavy loaded early in the week, um, tonight I have one assignment and then my plan was to work on a research project or watch a movie or something like that, you know.

I: Uh-huh.

S: Um…But generally Monday through Wednesday I'm pretty hunkered down…

I: Ah.

S: …doing work.

I: So, um, when does your week…when does your weekend begin?

S: Um…that depends. When do I start…if by weekend you mean going out and like enjoying myself, uh, I have an 8:30 class on Fridays, so rarely do I decide to go out on Thursdays

I: Mhmm.

S: although it's happened. Um, Wednesday night I, I probably could do something but don't really consider it all that fun to go out on Wednesdays

I: Mhmm

S: But, so I don't…more by choice, my weekend basically starts, um, after my 11:30 class on Friday. Um, my friends and I will go out to lunch or…shenanigans, or…

I: Um, by go out to lunch do you mean…

S: …leave campus.

I: Leave campus? So…

S: Yeah.

I: Do you leave campus a lot?

S: Um, there's an obligatory every once or two weeks you need to go to the store, or [?] to buy
     beer, or [?] I'm out of shampoo now, so I probably need to go to the store tomorrow,
     um…I'd say I need to go to the store about once every two weeks. My sister lives off
     campus…

(BK 9 Interview)

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