

Channels of Attention: Modes of Student Attention that Compete with Classroom Learning

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Abstract

Some students try to convert the classroom into a place where they can employ a kind of attention that enabled them to succeed elsewhere, but this kind of attention often works against learning. This article offers a model for conceptualizing why some students are difficult to teach by describing several “channels of attention” that students may arrive in class “tuned to”—the social, consumer, personality, entertainment, and street channels. This model provides a simpler way of responding to some student differences than those offered in theories on learning styles or cultural styles, and it points to the importance of training students to tune in to the "Educational Channel" that enables them to succeed in a given class. Implicit in the model is a concept of academic disengagement that is active, in contrast to the passive form usually described.

Introduction

One of the basic questions in education today is: How much should teachers adapt to students, and how much should students adapt to teachers? Two major approaches — learning styles and cultural styles — put much of the burden onto the teacher. Teachers are exhorted to adapt their instruction to the various learning styles of students, and teachers are exhorted to acquire an intercultural tact that encourages students to honor their home cultures while learning the skills necessary for success in school. Each student is considered to have a dominant learning style that determines how they learn best; in addition, many students are considered to have a cultural style that influences how they act in class. Students are typically described as being rather fixed by these styles, and teachers are assigned the task of negotiating changes and enlarging possibilities. Requiring teachers to accommodate such student differences has placed a large and perhaps impossible burden on teachers.

This article adds to that discussion by making distinctions among students that teachers can respond to more simply. Students bring something else to class that could easily be mistaken for learning styles or cultural styles, called here “channels of attention”— otherwise known as mental sets, scripts, roles, ways of focusing, habits of perceiving, valuing, thinking, feeling, and responding — that students learned outside of class, and that they attempt to use in class. Instead of shifting to the context of the classroom, some students attempt to transform the classroom into a context where they can continue to succeed using methods they learned elsewhere. Teachers deal not just with students who have different learning or cultural styles, but with students who compete to define the classroom as something other than a learning environment. Students do this, not in a destructive way, but in a normal, familiar effort to succeed at something they already know how to do well -- in a classroom context that often requires them to try things they are not yet good at.

This article offers a way of conceptualizing why some students are difficult to teach by proposing several widespread “channels of attention” that students may arrive in class “tuned to.” The concept is dynamic: Such channels change over time, and different channels may share characteristics. The five channels discussed in this paper are provisional but likely enough to be worth considering. A major task of teachers (in many educational settings) is to manage the ever-present competing channels so that the class remains focused, enough of the time, in a learning mode.

This article uses the term “Educational Channel” to refer to the attitudes, skills, and behaviors that lead to success in class. Because classes differ, the exact characteristics of the Educational Channel may shift from class to class (and among different activities in class), but students can reasonably be expected to make that shift once they understand what is expected of them and how to attain it. It is the job of the teacher to make clear what kind of effort students need to apply, and to help them learn to apply it.

Schools and colleges operate largely through classrooms where a single teacher instructs a group of students. Until that basic format changes, one of the most important requirements of education is a kind of acculturation -- teaching students how to learn well from teachers in classrooms -- and that requires students to learn specific ways of focusing attention and applying skills. Some students come to class with a way of acting that brought them success in a different setting, and they try to change the classroom into that setting, so they can continue their former success without going through the awkwardness of learning a new way to behave and succeed. Such students not only interpret the classroom in terms of a different context, they attempt to transform the classroom into that other context. In doing so, such students undermine, compete with, or disrupt the teacher's efforts to define and manage the class, and thus undermine their own chances to learn how to learn in class. This paper proposes a typology of "channels of attention" that students may bring to class and suggests ways for teachers to respond to them in order to maintain an educational focus.

Literature Review

The topic of this article overlaps with research on student differences, context shifting, scripts, and the cultivation of mental sets. There is a considerable literature on differences among students and how teachers should respond to those differences. Distinctions in innate intelligence, talent, or other giftedness have long been made and debated (e.g., Schwartz, 1997). Learning style theories similarly assume that major differences are inborn and predispose students to learn best in certain modalities. Teachers are often advised to diagnose student learning styles and adapt their instruction to accommodate them. Such theories have been treated in a large literature. For an overview and critique of learning styles theories, with an extensive bibliography, see Suskie (2003). While the underlying concept seems intuitively meaningful, the many instruments that purport to measure learning style remain in question, and they have not

yet produced a coherent, widely accepted theory and effective set of practices based on validated differences in student learning.

Cultural styles emphasize how students differ as a result of their upbringing in a particular cultural environment. The literature in this area encourages teachers to understand student differences as a product of culture, and to develop teaching practices that are sensitive to differences between the teacher's culture and the students' culture. Efforts have been made to delineate student responses that are affected by the culture of origin and to advise teachers how to respond appropriately—such as Vasquez (1998) and Kochman (1983). Advocates of cultural sensitivity also tend to place the burden on the teacher, who is exhorted to accommodate different cultural styles in the classroom; teachers who do not do so have been the target of criticism (e.g., Thompson, 2002). This article offers an alternate explanation for certain student behavior that could easily be interpreted as learning or cultural style.

The literature on Transactional Analysis contains accounts of scripts, called "games," that individuals follow in interactions with others. Berne (1964) spelled out a typology of games, and, using the TA method, Ernst (1972) produced a provocative analysis titled *Games Students Play*. The TA notion of a game overlaps in part with the focus of this paper in the way players attempt to recruit others into their games and thus control the interaction. TA, however, focuses on a psychological analysis of the interaction (mainly at the scale of dyads and small groups), while this paper considers the competing channels of student attention to be strongly influenced by the larger culture, especially through popular culture.

Goffman's dramaturgical analysis of social interactions (1959) touches a number of the themes considered here, and Goffman's model will receive specific attention later in this paper.

The concepts of learning style and cultural style both contain the assumption that students may cross into different contexts in which their learning styles or cultural styles may be inappropriate, or at least not be fully effective. The concept of shifting context has been investigated from a number of perspectives. Linguists have studied code-switching – how speakers shift from one language to another (for an extensive bibliography, see Alvarez Cáccamo, 2001; for a critique of code-switching, see Howard, 1996). Various forms of psychotherapy have focused on projection, the carrying of interpretations and responses from one context into another, and upon reframing the way one interprets one's experience by updating the context of interpretation (e.g., Boeree, 1997). Neurophysiologists report a recent renewal of interest in studying shifts in attentional set and interference between sets, as in Altmann and Gray (2000), especially in relation to neurological disorders and learning disabilities. Elementary teachers are routinely evaluated on their ability to facilitate context-shifting -- to manage students during the transition between activities in class (Tipton, 2003). Students in some places are coached on making the shift from one educational level to the next – e.g., from high school to college (Muskegium College, 1998)— but, aside from Waldorf schools (AWNSA, n.d.), with their use of ritual to facilitate transitions, there seems to be little

training for either teachers or students in helping students make a practiced shift of attention when entering a middle school, high school, or college classroom, and no study of this shift was noted. This article posits that students make certain transitions easily and naturally outside of class and can learn to make shifts to modes of attention that facilitate learning in class.

Although the cultivating of attention and mental sets has received considerable development in athletics (e.g., Nguyen, 2003), little attention seems to have been paid to systematically developing comparable skills in classrooms. Students have been encouraged to develop learning strategies for use inside and outside classrooms (e.g., "Overview of LASSI," 2003), but typically these are presented as a loose collection of available skills (e.g., self-motivation, monitoring one's progress, test-taking strategies), rather than as components of an integrated mode of focus that facilitates learning. Steele (1998) describes a mental set that can impede the performance of African American students. This article advances the idea of a learning mode that functions as an integrated mental set and depicts the classroom as an arena where different mental sets may compete for control.

The Appendix presents literary parallels from Shakespeare and Cervantes that contributed to the idea behind this paper.

A note on style: The ideas in this paper are provisional, but, in order to make them clear, I state them in a straightforward manner, with few qualifiers. Please read every assertion in this paper as if it had additional qualifiers like: may, might, could, sometimes, some students, some of the time -- and the like. Putting these in every sentence would make the paper difficult to read.

Channels of Attention

The Social Channel

The Social Channel tunes the student toward the communication cues of other students in an open, non-structured way that facilitates human contact in many settings, but which may work against the focused, goal-directed nature of the classroom. Students tuned to the Social Channel seek to start interactions by sending out signals to everyone else that they are ready to respond, that they can be recruited into an interaction or a conversation. The Social Channel is more than a tendency to have an occasional word with a fellow student. When students are tuned to the Social Channel, it's as if they have Instant Messenger always turned on, so that, no matter what else is on the screen of their attention, they are immediately available to be distracted by a kind of social conversation that seems mainly to serve the purpose of maintaining contact between people, asserting one's presence, and expressing reactions – activities that have their place outside the classroom, but which easily compete with learning. Students who thrive on the Social Channel may interfere with learning activities by attempting to convert them into social events.

The Social Channel expresses the high degree of informal orality that members of all cultures tend to develop naturally, and it demonstrates some of the characteristics of oral culture (Ong, 1988). Speakers use informal vocabulary and grammar, often speak in fragments, use slang or in-group terms, and may use the non-standard pronunciation of their sub-group. Such informal oral communication may depend heavily on voice inflections, facial expressions, gestures, and postures. Even though the topics discussed may belong to another time and place (e.g., what I saw on TV last night), oral communication places a strong emphasis on the present, shifting quickly in response to the speakers, rather than developing a single line of thought at length -- as required in many academic contexts. People who are speaking informally tend to join their thoughts in a string of "ands," and they tend to repeat themselves, especially on emotionally charged topics. When asked to explain something, a speaker who is immersed in this oral culture is likely to repeat or paraphrase, rather than analyze or compare. Oral culture is said to be "copious" -- speakers use redundancy and repetition, rather than analysis and critical thinking. And, as Ong notes, oral culture is "agonistic" or argumentative. It "situates knowledge within a context of struggle" (37) -- which anyone can observe on current political talk-shows on radio and television.

Ong contrasts each of the characteristics of orality (a major element in the Social Channel) with literacy -- a way of reading, writing, thinking, and talking that is arguably one of the primary goals of the educational system. The kind of literate thinking that is promoted by writing permits sustained thought, analytical thinking, extended investigation and comparison, consideration of evidence, analysis of arguments -- activities generally labeled as critical thinking. Literacy is based on carefully naming things and precisely establishing their relationships. Literate writing and speech is leaner

than oral speech, more muscular (because it carries more weight), less redundant, more formal (because more precise). Because it is based on writing and reading, literacy deals with language on the page, without gesture, tone of voice, timing, vocal emphasis, and the force of emotional expression -- all of which are prominent in oral language. Orality promotes an external focus -- outward to other people -- while literacy requires the development of an inner voice, self-reflection, categorization, ordering, planning. Because it emphasizes analysis, literacy must also place a greater emphasis on creatively synthesizing the concepts that it presents in categorized, analyzed, named parts. (See discussion in Grow, 1996.)

There is some reason to believe that it is more difficult today to teach students to make the transition into literacy as a way of thinking, writing, and talking. The linguist John McWhorter (2003) argued that, for at least the past 40 years, Americans have moved away from the precision of formal, literate language, toward increasing informality in speech and writing. Americans, McWhorter maintains, distrust formality in language, due to a long-standing national attitude that has been greatly amplified since the counterculture of 1965, when "the elaborate forms of English once thought of as the bedrock of respectability" came to be considered "archaic and irrelevant," if not oppressive instruments of authority (234). In McWhorter's view, Americans today place less value on the crafted, elaborated language that was the norm 50 or 75 years ago. Today's language is more informal, oral, spontaneous, slangy, emotional -- and profane. This trend toward informality can be seen by comparing current email with letters written around the time of World War II.

Students, then, not only grow up with the normal immersion in oral culture with friends and family, they grow up (in McWhorter's analysis) in an America that has increasingly devalued more precise, formal, and elaborated forms of speech and writing. The result is an informal, spontaneous, oral, present-centered, highly vocal, emotional but fleeting mode of interaction, called here the Social Channel -- which you can usually sample when you overhear a loud student cell-phone conversation in the hallway. (Literacy is the center of considerable controversy, and the approach advocated in this article is not shared by all. For an example of a view critical of the way literacy education has dealt with African Americans, see Fox, 1992.)

The Social Channel can include a kind of interactive multi-tasking. When students are tuned to the Social Channel, it is common for them not only to have several conversations, but for more than one person to talk at once, in the same conversation. Such competing conversations may increase in volume and intensity until students are practically shouting at one another, but in a way that seems to be enjoyable, as students stir up emotions and let off energy.

The Consumer Channel

When students come to class tuned to the Consumer Channel, they bring with them the attitudes, skills, and actions that have brought them success while engaged in a consumer culture, and they attempt to transform the classroom into a setting where their consumer skills bring them a similar feeling of success. In doing so, they bring pressure to change the classroom into a kind of store where the teacher is the sales clerk and knowledge is a commodity they buy or reject on the basis of fad, personal preference, or whim.

It is widely noted that consumer culture exerts a potent influence on students' lives. They live in what is commonly described as a consumer-driven economy (e.g., Jhally & Shally, 1991) in which the purchasing choices made by individuals exerts a powerful influence on the economy overall. "Consumer confidence" is one of the standard measures used to indicate the condition of the economy. As members of this consumer economy, students receive many messages that tell who they are, what they want, and how to act. The consumer economy influences their lives in many ways, but students participate in it most directly through shopping.

The Consumer Channel encourages students to focus on their likes and dislikes as determinants of what goes on around them, in a manner that makes them feel powerful. In the mall, they can change from one store to another on an impulse. Messages in advertising and commerce have led young people to think of themselves as the shapers of trends, fashion, technology, and products. As consumers, they are portrayed as having great authority, and their power of choice has been advertised to them as a vital force in society. The power of such consumers is rooted in the present; it happens now. As consumers, they generally believe that they already know enough to accept or reject what is being offered to them, whether in a mall or in the classroom. They are already enough "in the know" to believe that few consumer activities require learning of the kind required in school. (For a contrasting view that emphasizes informed consumers, see Lewis & Bridger, 1991).

Advertising is the great vehicle for promoting consumer values and maintaining the Consumer Channel. Along with promoting products that help provide the basic necessities of life, advertising has long used the technique of implying that, in purchasing a product, consumers also attain intangible values as well—values like status, self-worth, popularity, success, family togetherness, sex appeal, happiness, and relief from every kind of problem -- a theme developed, for example, by Hine in *I Want That! -- How We All Became Shoppers* (2003). Advertising often seems to promise a sense of identity or affiliation, a sense of meaning and belonging, rather than just a product. In addition to the normal confusions of growing up, students may be immersed in commercially created confusions about who they are, what they need, and what matters in life, wrapped into what Jones (1997) called "the struggle to support a delusive sense of identity through consumption." Students on the Consumer Channel may unknowingly feel that they can

attain profound educational values by passively consuming schooling, with the same kind of attention they would use to pick one color of shirt over another.

Students in the Consumer Channel can be arbitrary and stubborn in their choices in the classroom, just as they can be in a store. Some seem to feel that they have a “right to choose” in many areas that teachers control — what to do in class, when to do it, whether to do homework, what to pay attention to. Such students may feel that they have the power to judge and reject the teacher’s offerings, to criticize the teacher’s product or skill at selling. Being on the Consumer Channel tends to heighten students’ tendencies to feel entitled. Consumer attitudes may contribute to a version of empowerment that is unproductive in the classroom. And the boredom some students feel may be not only a response to the classroom, but also a byproduct of consumer culture. As Lasch (1978) argued, consumer culture (working through advertising) "manufactures a product of its own: the consumer, perpetually unsatisfied, restless, anxious, and bored" (72).

Students on the Consumer Channel crowd the mental atmosphere of the classroom with the whole of consumer culture. Teachers then have to compete with every product, everywhere, in a kind of worldwide, all-product, all-media, free trade competition for student attention. To students tuned to the Consumer Channel, the classroom tends to be just another store in the universal mall, and the teacher is just another sales clerk, whose product had better be the most engaging, best presented, and most fetchingly designed of them all, or their attention will leave this store and go elsewhere to consider other attractive commodities, if only in their minds. In this atmosphere, a teacher is expected to be more than good; she must have the best product, presented the best way, in the entire world of consumer offerings. Teachers compete not just with the distractions available in the classroom; they may be competing with the entire worldwide reach of consumer culture, as it is idealized in the minds of students tuned to the Consumer Channel.

As consumers, students may feel that they can buy education, or that they have the right to be treated with the automatic deference given to valued customers. They may not realize that they must work in school to earn their way, and that their status in school results from achievement, not from the choosing, rejecting, and appropriating that dominate their activities in consumer culture.

The Personality Channel

Personality is one of the glories of human life. It is through our personalities that we express ourselves and know one another. Learning, however, requires more of a cognitive focus, and students who come to class focused overmuch on the Personality Channel may be difficult to teach. Such students can be engaging and difficult. In one respect, they are present and responsive; little happens in the class without a response from this student. But the response typically does not further the activity of the class; it serves to remind everyone that, no matter what appears to be going on in class, this

particular student always holds the limelight. To a student on the Personality Channel, class is not about learning; it is about this student's personality.

Such students act as if they want to be the center of attention by frequently drawing attention to themselves—often by being loud, emotional, and over-reactive. They are focused on their sense of who they are, and their activity in class serves to enact that self, to broadcast themselves, to star in an “All-Me-All-The-Time” television show. They are centrifugally self-centered, with the sense of self that feels real to them only when they have an audience. Many kinds of students act out roles; students tuned to the Personality Channel are the prima donnas of an opera about themselves.

Some students on the Personality Channel act as if they have no 'volume control.' They come to school with their personalities playing full blast, as if every moment should provide them with an opportunity to broadcast any aspect of their personalities they wish, into any setting, at any time, in conditions under their control—and as loudly or obtrusively as they choose. Like most young people, such students probably do not yet have a settled sense of self; but this does not prevent some from projecting their personalities in a dominating manner.

Students tuned to the Personality Channel not only may distract other students from class activities, they may also recruit other students to tune into some form of the Entertainment Channel, where other students become audience to Miss Personality's show. The teacher may have little role in this drama, except to be repeatedly upstaged in grand or subtle ways. Students who continuously broadcast their personalities may need to learn to use the volume control on their personalities, to tune their attention from the emotional and interpersonal to the focused cognitive inwardness in which much of the most important learning takes place.

Not every student acts out the Personality Channel in a histrionic way. Many are quietly personality-centered, and the problem they present to a teacher is worth examining, because it may be more widespread than the occasional histrionic (some may say narcissistic) student.

Personality is about the part of ourselves that does not appear to change. Most people feel that they are born with their personalities and retain them their entire lives. Experienced from the inside, personality feels constant: You are you, you have been you, you will continue to be you. One experiences changes in personality as rare and significant events, even though outsiders, such as parents and teachers, may observe changes in personality over time. With this sense of stability comes a sense of danger: Anything that challenges that sense of "me" is likely to be seen as a threat. For such a person, education is good when it affirms the personality as the basis of identity; education is bad when it threatens that identity.

Questions directed in class to students on the Personality Channel may seem more like threats than attempts to help them learn how to think critically or develop a more accurate way of using words or reflect on actions and their results or develop a more comprehensive worldview. Such questions may seem to be a personal attack on the students' identity and worth. Instead of answers and discussion, the teacher may receive defensive remarks, offended comments, or an inexplicable personal attack in return.

Feeling attacked in this way by change, students may focus their efforts on holding onto what they know—a certain limited way of relating to one another and to the world—rather than on learning new things. In doing so, they may turn away from schooling or oppose it.

The Entertainment Channel

Entertainment plays an important role in the lives of most students, and they develop considerable competence at participating in entertainment, especially as audience. But when students bring an entertainment orientation to class, this can cause problems.

Students tuned to the Entertainment Channel bring habits like those they developed while watching television. This channel leads them to passively expect to be energized, motivated, directed, and entertained. They come tuned to the part of their minds that expects everything to be arranged for their diversion. This channel is related to the Consumer Channel, in that students on the Entertainment Channel are accustomed to picking and choosing. The entertainment itself may be the lightest kind of fluff, but its audience is highly demanding; it has to be just the right fluff—or they will switch channels. Students tuned to the Entertainment Channel decide what to do in class on the basis of what grabs, entertains and motivates them. They can pay intense attention and exhibit a high level of engagement; but they can just as quickly turn away with a thumbs-down on the imaginary TV remote.

As Kottak noted in describing college student behavior (2000, pp. 94-96), students sometimes behave in class as if they were watching television together at home or in a lounge, perhaps because “by the end of high school, they will have spent 22,000 hours in front of the set, versus only 11,000 hours in the classroom... Televiewing causes people to duplicate in many areas of their lives styles of behavior developed while watching television.” They may eat noisily, idly chat, call out to one another, laugh raucously, leave the room and return, walk around – and expect no more objection from the teacher than they would get from the TV set at home. Kottak concludes that many students “perceive nothing unusual in acting the same way in front of a live speaker and fellow students as they do when they watch television.” When some students leave a

college lecture after 10 or 15 minutes, Kottack wrote that they “decided to turn off the ‘set’ or ‘change channels.’”

As anyone knows who has watched teen television, some entertainments have a mean side to them. Some students, when in the entertainment mode, take pleasure in the embarrassment of others, in stirring up personal conflicts and in watching people squirm. They may try to stimulate such situations in the classroom, just for fun. It’s entertaining for them to watch.

The Street Channel

Some students come to class from the tough inner city streets. They bring ways of acting that are, outside the classroom, essential to the students' success and perhaps survival. The challenges of teaching inner city students have been widely addressed (e.g., McIntyre, 1996). In recent years, streetwise attitudes have been elevated in popular culture to a style imitated by many students who did not grow up on the streets. Their actions represent not "the street" but the Street Channel -- a role learned largely from popular culture. In a given student, the Street Channel may be limited to styles of clothing, ways of speaking and gesturing, and a certain walk. Behind these, however, may lie a mental set that is driven by a worldview incompatible with classroom learning in many ways. Insofar as students have adopted the street worldview, they may have -- and cause -- difficulty in class.

Before inner city attitudes became widely dispersed through popular culture, they were studied by sociologists and teachers; much of what follows is drawn from their work (Dandy, 1991; Foster, 1990; Kochman, 1990; McIntyre, 1996). In 1986, Foster opened the first edition of his book with “Lower class behavior in general, and lower class black streetcorner behavior in particular, is still present in inner-city schools and has spread to most school and non-school settings.” That spread has since been vastly amplified by music, music videos, fashion, magazines, and other aspects of the popular culture centered around hip-hop and rap.

The Street Channel, as documented by the authors mentioned, teaches students that life is unpredictable and dangerous. Such students may not trust the world to be orderly and dependable. Nor do they expect the classroom to be orderly and dependable. Because they expect the world to be unpredictable and predatory, streetwise students constantly seek advantage and seize it when the opportunity appears. Theirs is a stance of extreme fluidity, extreme readiness: anything can happen, anything goes – be ready. And that means, for them, be ready to escape threats, defend themselves from attack, and turn rapidly changing circumstances to advantage. It is a highly improvisational approach to an unpredictable and potentially dangerous world.

For all their capacity for brilliance, students on the Street Channel may be burdened with a sense of hopelessness and despair. In the rough music that has brought street attitudes into popular culture, life is precarious. A person can die at any moment, a victim of random violence, revenge, or persecution. A sense of heroic, romantic, adolescent victimhood hangs over it all, the image of a rebel doomed to die and hoping to die in glory. In such a setting, there is little value in long-term preparation for a distant future. Education, by contrast, is based on the faith that there is a future, many years away, that is worth preparing for with thousands of hours of diligent, focused work. The assumptions of the Street Channel make it difficult for students to envision a distant future, one that is worth working for, one in which they have a chance of success. And so they have little incentive to abandon street attitudes and adopt attitudes that will enable them to succeed in class. The Street Channel may be thought of as another incarnation of a long succession of ways students have expressed alienation from schooling and society -- including James Dean slouchers, hippies, Black Panthers, rockers, punks, goths, and rappers.

The difference here goes beyond how such students talk or the grammar they use. Such students -- insofar as they are caught up in the Street Channel -- are not yet students. Their minds have not yet arrived in class. They are still engaged elsewhere -- most of them with the pop culture values in their imaginations.

Those loyal to the street may feel that classroom comportment violates the sense of self that has brought them success and belonging on the street—whether a real inner-city street or the mythical street of popular culture. The order of the classroom may appear to be a challenge to the personal authority of a streetwise kid; the classroom may also represent the oppressive society that the Street Channel considers itself to be in opposition to.

Students tuned to the Street Channel tend to worry about maintaining status and keeping the respect of others. Such students may be suspicious, on guard, keeping a hair trigger that makes them quick to take offense, go on the defensive, or mount a counterattack. They can be overly concerned with being “treated right,” with the deference they demand. This deference may be appropriate on the Street Channel, but it is not appropriate in the classroom, where a different kind of respect rules. “Street” students may be extremely sensitive to slights that they interpret as disrespecting or disgracing (“dissing”) them (see especially Anderson, 1994). To fend off such challenges, street students may attempt to dominate the space as a way of protecting their status from challenge. They may, for example, cultivate a threatening appearance that broadcasts, “Don’t mess with me or you’ll be sorry!”

The basic attitude of the Street Channel is one of lack: Everyone, in the street view, is competing to take control of a limited amount of success. For one to gain, another must lose; weakening another’s power is the only way of creating new

opportunities for oneself. Such competition results in feeling easily threatened, hypervigilance, defensiveness, and preemptive self-assertion.

Some students on the Street Channel come to class ready to have their sense of self so easily challenged that ordinary classroom activities can feel like threats. To students tuned to the Street Channel, ordinary educational challenges may appear to be challenges to their status, their quantity of respect, their very worth, rather than ordinary transactions in the learning process. If such students are encouraged to remain tuned to the Street Channel out of the belief that this somehow honors their cultural styles, they may lose the opportunity to learn how to learn in school.

Competing Channels

Theories of learning style maintain that a student has a characteristic learning style that is dominant. Theories of cultural style maintain that a student's attitudes and actions are influenced in a major way by a specific cultural style. Like personality, a learning style or a cultural style is a relatively fixed influence. Students change learning styles or cultural styles only with considerable difficulty and over a long period of time.

The channels described in this paper differ from the concepts of learning styles and cultural styles in that all of a student's channels are available to that student all the time, and the student may shift among them, in many cases more easily than changing shoes. In this sense, channels are like the performance scripts described by Goffman (1959) – learned patterns of behavior that are evoked by specific contexts and are appropriate in those contexts. Goffman illustrates the concept of scripts by the roles of bank teller or doctor—each of which includes specific actions, attitudes, gestures, costumes, props, knowledge, and skills, which are used in “performing” the role, like an actor with an audience. When the actors go off stage or return home, they drop the role.

On the penultimate page of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman sums up that the key factor in his dramaturgical analysis of a wide range of social encounters "is the maintenance of a single definition of the situation, this definition having to be expressed, and this expression sustained in the face of a multitude of potential disruptions" (254). Reading that, you might think he had been describing a teacher in front of a classroom of students competing, as I have described them, to disrupt her "performance" and redefine the context. But in fact this work has for 250 pages attributed a kind of cooperation to audiences that many contemporary teachers would find missing.

To Goffman, writing in 1959, audiences (such as students in a class) have "the tactful tendency... to act in a protective way in order to help the performers [in our case, teachers] save their own show" (229). Such audiences are governed by a profound "tact" toward those who are interacting with them. They are possessed of "an elaborate etiquette by which individuals guide themselves in their capacity as members of the audience. This

involves: the giving of a proper amount of attention and interest; a willingness to hold in check one's own performance..., [and] the desire, above all else to avoid a scene" (231).

Although Goffman drew nearly all of his examples from other kinds of social interactions (involving waiters, salesmen, doctors, and others), his analysis in no way excluded the classroom as another instance of the qualities he noted in people as they collude to help one another maintain the performance of the roles through which everyday life is enacted. Nearly all the "disruptions" he analyzes arise from difficulties the performer has in maintaining a role, and Goffman repeatedly observes how other participants (as team members or as audience) step in with subtle cues to assist the performer in fulfilling the role -- so essential is the power of the social drama they share and mutually maintain.

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, it is remarkable to find not a single mention, in Goffman's many examples, of an instance where an audience competed with the speaker for control of the context -- a situation this paper posits as nearly normal in American schools today. In particular, more students today seem unwilling to "hold in check" their own "performances" so the teacher has enough social space to lead them in the mutual performance of teaching and learning. And the activity of many classrooms, at least some of the time, has shifted from audiences tactfully participating in a mutual enterprise, to a competition to define which play we are in, what game we are playing, and who gets to make the rules and decide who wins. The contrast with Goffman's observations of cooperation and tact in 1959 is striking.

In the classroom as we are describing it, not only are several channels of attention available to choose from, more than one may actually be in effect at a given time -- within a group or inside an individual. For example, recent popular culture has promoted a form of improvisation -- sometimes seen groups of young men -- at schools at work, and in public places -- that combines spontaneous and practiced social interaction (such as ritual gestures, verbal rapping, and musical ad-libs), with an entertainment orientation (they can be charming and funny), that works through the projection of vivid and sometimes brazen personalities. Such groups often dress in the high fashion of their peers and flaunt their connection with consumer culture through clothing blazoned with brand logos. And, flitting through the quickly changing, fluid flow of interchanges you sometimes feel the hint of a possibility of menace -- the sense that the unpredictable, dangerous exploitation of the street is never far -- or the suspicion that you are at risk of being conned.

Such performances can take place in surprising places. Appearing unexpectedly and out of context seems to be part of the performance -- the way some students reading in the library suddenly burst out with a comment, a snatch of song, or a loud cell-phone conversation -- with little apparent awareness of or concern for the disruptive effect this has on others. Whatever other functions these actions fulfill, they at least serve to compete for control of a context that has, up till now, been controlled by an employer, a teacher, a librarian, a parent, or by conventions of politeness the student may not yet

subscribe to. These performances seem to be a way of saying "Killroy may have been here back in the day, but *I* am here right now."

Such improvisations seem to be influenced at present by music videos, comedy routines, and scenes from popular films, and they can be immensely engaging -- provided you are not a customer at a "fast" food restaurant run by comedians, a shopper trying to get the attention of a cashier who is riffing with the bag boy, or a teacher trying to get chatty students to practice the kind of cognition that helps them use language, concepts, and numbers with precision.

The context of the classroom alone may not have the power to trigger appropriate behavior in some students. The teacher's task is to make the Educational Channel the predominant activity in the classroom, even though other channels may be dominant sometimes and are potentially present all the time.

The Educational Channel: What classrooms require of students

In our educational system, learning how to succeed in the classroom is as important as learning to read; it is the doorway to most of the kinds of learning our schools and colleges are capable of providing. While learning is a natural act, learning how to succeed in school requires a complex set of skills, attitudes, and behaviors that are far from natural and require extensive practice. While schools need to adapt as much as they can to the needs of students, students also need to be acculturated to schooling. Some students learn this new role quickly; others require much more time and help. For whatever reasons, more students seem to be attending college who either lack the Educational Channel or who do not reliably switch to it when entering the classroom.

While it can be enormously rewarding and even great fun, the learning mode -- the Educational Channel -- is complex and demanding. Because teachers were all students who learned the Educational Channel—it came easily to most of them—they may need to make a special effort to recognize how hard it is for some students to learn how to succeed in a classroom setting, and how complicated that success is.

The nature of the Educational Channel may differ from one classroom to the next, and it may change as a classroom moves among different activities. As a result, the Educational Channel is difficult to characterize in the abstract, though teachers can characterize it for their individual classes, and educational institutions can characterize it in a more general way. The following observations will not cover all situations: No summary can characterize both an art class and a math class equally well; what they require of students is different in many ways.

Classrooms may pass through many kinds of activities, but they are fundamentally ordered, disciplined, and focused. They have a purpose, and the minutes of the day are devoted to that purpose and no other. The Educational Channel emphasizes

the importance of understanding requirements and following instructions, clarifying confusion, achieving a task-orientation, working toward specific results. In most classrooms, students have to learn to speak and listen in an orderly manner, practice analytical and critical thinking, speak and write in an analytical, cognitive manner that contributes to learning.

In the Educational Channel, students have to focus on the process of learning. They need to learn to ask: What do I know? What do I need to know? How does this new knowledge relate to what I already know? How do I learn it? How do I make this new knowledge my own? Doing this requires a degree of sustained, inward focus that their previous experience may not have taught them. They need to learn that focus in order to do well in class.

In the Educational Channel, teachers teach students how to take responsibility for learning, how to evaluate their learning against the standard to be achieved. The Educational Channel always has a dual focus: on the present learning task, and on the development of the learner.

The Educational Channel is largely shaped by the structure and limitations of our educational system, in which a large group of students with different experiences and desires is led by an imperfect teacher toward learning necessary skills. It is not a perfect arrangement, but it is what we have, and it can be made to work better.

How the Other Channels Can Conflict with the Educational Channel

This section suggests ways that the roles students bring with them can compete with the classroom, and how teachers might respond. The tables summarize this section, using examples that are hypothetical but plausible.

Social Channel

The Social Channel exerts a pressure on the teacher to turn the classroom into an open setting where social chitchat is encouraged, even for the teacher to become a buddy and join in. The focus of students is external -- on other people. While learning can take place through group interaction, the social channel tends to keep students thinking in ways that are associative, random, impulsive, and forgotten as soon as they are over. Such conversations also tend toward multi-tasking, with more than one person speaking, more than one conversation going on at once, and students dropping in and out of the activity at will.

A skillful teacher might be able to incorporate a certain amount of chat into lessons or to re-direct the energy of students from the Social Channel to the topic of the class. But the Social Channel itself tends to transitory interactions that keep students on a level of thinking and interaction they are already proficient in and probably produce no lasting educational results.

Learning-oriented class discussion differs from the Social Channel in some of the ways the written differs from the spoken. Part of the teacher's task is to teach students a way of interacting with one another in class that replaces the Social Channel with the Educational Channel – in which student interactions are focused around learning goals. When this succeeds, discussions help students learn to think critically and creatively, listen, formulate concepts, communicate clearly, handle the ideas and content of the course, and develop the kinds of thought processes that facilitate clear, sustained nonfiction writing. Such precision, depth, organization, and learning, however, are not a natural outcome of the Social Channel. Teachers who encourage student interaction as part of the learning process need to be certain that they are not just staying on the relatively superficial (and quickly forgotten) level of the Social Channel, but are producing lasting learning. (See Table 1.)

Consumer Channel

Education presents a radically different message than consumer culture. Education changes students from consumers to producers, from choosing to making, from unknowingly accepting what the world presents to them to becoming the people who create the world. An educated person knows that all the commodities that seem to appear by magic are actually the result of a long process that often starts with skills of the kind that students learn in classrooms. Every consumer product results from multiple levels of production, nearly all of which depend on the literacy, numeracy, and habits of diligence learned in school.

The change from consumer to producer takes years of preparation, experience, and practice. It is much easier for students to imagine themselves as consumers-- flipping channels, turning magazine pages, surfing the internet, changing from store to store, exercising the power of choice over a richness that appears inexplicably available to everyone without any effort on their part. It is the teacher's job to penetrate that illusion and help students begin to learn how things get made and done in the world, how they can become doers and makers and producers, and the kind of preparation that requires. Such preparation can appear to be a daunting task, but transforming students into producers is what the educational system normally sets out to do and does reasonably well for many students.

The sense of “like” and “dislike” that students bring with the Consumer Channel often works against education, which requires students not only to pick and choose, but to do the disciplined work of learning that will turn them into producers and also enlarge and educate their ability to choose. (See Table 2.)

Personality

Learning is about change. Learning takes place in the part of our being that constantly adapts by acquiring new knowledge, testing what we know, learning new

skills and revising old ones. This more cognitive level of our being is not only comfortable having its knowledge challenged and improved, it actively seeks those challenges, it tests its limits, it wants to know what it is up against. The cognitive level of mind seeks security by knowing about the world, by building a comprehensive worldview that a person can use in navigating through life. On the cognitive level, our main activity is producing and improving the worldview that enables us to understand the world and function in it -- adapting, as needed, to many contexts. Challenge and change are normal parts of this process.

For education to be effective on a deep level, people have to allow themselves to be changed by it. They have to be open to a deep level of personal change. But if they are centered too strongly on their personalities and are working too hard to maintain those personalities in the face of external forces, students may resist learning from the fear that it will cause them, not to grow and develop into fuller human beings, but to lose what is valuable about themselves — a family pattern, a group identity, a sense of self they have already formed and are protecting, or a fragile identity they defend at all costs.

Part of the teacher's task is to help students distinguish between the sense of self that defines their personalities and the changing, growing cognitive worldview that education enriches and transforms. (See Table 3.)

Entertainment

Students on the Entertainment Channel can exert pressure upon the teacher to become a performer instead of a teacher. Such students put pressure on teachers to entertain them, to win and hold an attention that is tuned to the pace of television, video games, or music performances. Teachers who try to do this must produce fast-paced, rapidly changing material that engages students in multiple short episodes, preferably with instant interaction. Although the roles of performer and teacher can be meaningfully combined, that combination is best suited (as argued in Grow, 1991) only for students at a certain stage of development, and teachers in this role may tend to keep students in that stage, rather than encouraging them to grow toward greater self-direction. When students expect to be entertained, motivated, energized, and diverted by a teacher, they take a rather passive role toward learning: Teaching is the featured event, not learning.

When the teacher appears mainly as a source of amusement, students may develop attention and involvement; it is the kind of involvement, though, that can be turned off as easily as switching TV channels, and this kind of teaching runs the risk of encouraging students to become engaged only with external performances that grab and hold their attention -- rather than learning to focus attention, by choice, on something that may be difficult to learn.

Entertainment today tends to be fast-paced, intensely stimulating, with frequent shifts of focus. It would take a remarkable teacher to duplicate these effects, maintain a

focus on the topic, and produce lasting learning. Rather than retraining teachers to be star performers, it might be better to train students to be active learners, and to retrain teachers to work with such learners.

Entertainment teaches students certain skills that might be transformed into classroom learning. It teaches them to expect high standards (mainly of others, those who are performing). Perhaps they can be led to expect the same high standards from their own performance as students. (See Table 4.)

Street Channel

As with all the channels, the extent to which the Street Channel can conflict with the Educational Channel depends on how intensely the student enacts it, and how intensely the student attempts to bring its standards into the classroom. For some students, the Street Channel will be nothing more than a fashion statement; for others, it may be a deeply ingrained mode of self-expression and a system of belief.

Students tuned to the Street Channel are accustomed to doing as they please. They tend to have an exaggerated sense of the value of their opinions and choices. They may be unaccustomed to accepting the discipline and authority that schooling requires. Indeed, they may view school as the most immediate representative of an oppressive society that the street student (amplifying normal adolescent rebellion) stands in opposition to. With such students, teachers face the problem of establishing routines and discipline that do not produce opposition.

The Street Channel predisposes students to believe that life is unpredictable and dangerous. They may have difficulty accepting classroom procedures. Teachers may have to work with such students long and hard to gain enough trust that the students begin to believe that the classroom is a safe and dependable environment. Because the street sees others as predatory, teachers may have difficulty engaging such students in cooperative activities, in shared learning goals.

On the street, there is never enough to go around—in either material goods or respect. For one to win, another must lose. Street students need to learn that, in the classroom, success is not a limited quantity; everyone can succeed, and no one need fail as a result. Street students may need to undergo a kind of conversion before they realize that they can cooperate in the success of other students without lessening their own chances.

The extreme fluidity of students on the Street Channel can present a special challenge to teachers trying to bring such students to focus on goals, and on a distant future worth preparing for. Like the other channels, the Street Channel is focused on the present, on being. Teachers must work to re-focus such students on process -- on goals and how to attain them.

Their gift at improvisation makes some students highly effective in verbal exchanges, as long as the subject matter does not challenge their knowledge. Some can talk brilliantly and respond in inventive ways. It would be a mistake, however, to equate this streetwise improvisational conversation with the kind of reflective conversation that develops such educational goals as self-awareness, self-correction, and critical thinking. Their speech uses not only a different vocabulary and syntax, but it may also be based on a mental set that conflicts with the goals of education.

Students on the Street Channel may be the strongest competitors the teacher faces in defining what the classroom is for and what kind of behavior is appropriate. Street students' tendency to feel disrespected produces a special challenge for teachers, in a setting where cognitive challenges can easily be mistaken for challenges to a student's worth or status. Students on the Street Channel attempt to transform the classroom into a street-like atmosphere where they can either dominate or knowingly look on from a position of jaded superiority while others fail. To those "on the street," the polite, orderly focus of the classroom may appear contemptible, weak, and useless. It won't defend them from the threats they imagine themselves to be exposed to all the time, even in the classroom.

Some students on the Street Channel can be appealed to on the basis of their sense of respect. (For an example of programs that include training in giving respect, see www.allaboutrespect.net.) The teacher can encourage such students to be big enough to back down from the little challenges of the classroom, with their self-respect intact, and take things in stride. Others face a more difficult challenge in slowly learning to become successful students without losing the sense of self-respect that the Street Channel has taught them to think of as so fragile that a single failure, even a single look, can snatch it away. (See Table 5.)

Discussion

General observations

The five competing channels are focused on what many students already know how to do well -- socialize, shop, be entertained, exhibit their personalities, or enact a role learned from popular culture. In contrast, schooling is focused on what students do *not* already know and must work to learn. The channels focus on who students already are and what they already know. Success in school comes slowly, through incremental achievements, over a long period of time, requiring deep personal transformation. (Achieving a professional level of competence in any field requires thousands of hours of focused practice.) The "outside" channels are largely about being; schooling is largely about process. The two provide different kinds of rewards, and students need to learn to value the small, incremental changes that schooling provides, and to imagine how these can add up to a worthwhile result. Developing that ability in students is an essential part of the teacher's task.

Respecting students "as they are" may inadvertently encourage students to remain tuned to ways of being that cause them difficulty in class, and that may cause difficulty for others in the class. The teacher is challenged to find a balance between respecting students as they are and moving them to where they need to be. Students tuned to the social, consumer, personality, and entertainment channels may be cultivating a sense of empowerment that is unproductive in the classroom. Those on the personality and street channels may feel threatened by ordinary classroom activities.

The Nature of Channels

This paper is based on the idea that people behave differently in different contexts and can choose appropriate behavior. How the world seems to them, what they feel, how they respond to those feelings, how they express them, what they pay attention to, how they respond to educational challenges, what they consider to be an appropriate response – all this is strongly influenced by the way students are tuned, by what “channel” they are on. And since students have considerable choice in the way they tune themselves, students have considerable influence over how they perceive the classroom and act in it. Students' responses are not predetermined exclusively by their learning styles or cultural styles.

Some of the descriptions above may have emphasized the negative aspect of student disruptions, but some distractions can be delightful. Four students in one computer lab, sitting side by side, began quietly improvising vocal music together, till it grew into a performance so absorbing that everyone was listening to it. I quietly directed them to focus again on their work: they had less than an hour left to finish a project.

It may not be enough to require students to “pay attention” or “take notes” or otherwise apply learning skills. In such a case, students may pay attention and do their work while still tuned by a different intention, with its accompanying values, skills, knowledge, and responses that compete with and perhaps undermine learning. For example, students may take notes while still tuned to the Social Channel, which is somewhat like reading while carrying on a conversation about an unrelated subject. What such students need is not only to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in school, but also to acquire a new mental set, a new way of focusing attention, a new orientation – access to the internal Educational Channel. This channel can then become part of a student's "capacity to negotiate among contexts, to be socially and politically astute in discourse use" (Dyson, 1997, p. 5). To put this another way, students have to recognize that the classroom is as different a place as basketball is different from football. They have to learn the rules and practice the skills needed for success in this place. You don't dribble a football.

If this line of thought has merit, it points toward the conclusion that students need to learn to identify themselves as students, as learners, engaged productively and successfully in a specialized, long-range learning process that leads to a worthwhile goal-and teachers need to help them do this. For a student who does not know how to tune

into this mode of focus reliably and at will, learning how may be more important than learning anything else.

This article can be interpreted as a way of talking about the powerful influence popular culture can have on students, and how some roles that they learn from popular culture might interfere with classroom success. The influence of popular culture is clear in what the entertainment, consumer, and street channels -- all of which are propagated by TV and other media. Popular culture may also be an influence in the social and personality channels by providing role models and promoting styles of talking, interaction, identity, and self-expression. The influence of popular culture is consolidated and transmitted through (what for many students is) a peer culture that is intensely involved in it. Taken together, elements of popular culture (television, music, film, fashion, sports, celebrities, etc.) seem to absorb enormous amounts of the attention of some students and dominate their thinking, goals, and sense of self. The classroom competes with the roles students have learned from popular culture.

Academic disengagement

Academic disengagement has been identified (e.g., by Ogbu and Davis, 2003) as a major factor in why African American students lag behind others in school achievement. This paper proposes that academic disengagement may occur in students who focus their considerable mental ability onto other channels and do not learn to function in school. "Disengaged" students may display a remarkable ability to focus on, learn, remember, describe, discuss, and analyze their experiences on the social, consumer, personality, entertainment, and street channels. Such students are not dumb; their minds are just focused elsewhere. And, being focused elsewhere, such students may either compete for control of the classroom or become disengaged from it.

Can teachers tap into the natural excitement and motivation so many students have for the non-school channels, and then focus that excitement onto school subjects? Although this is a natural approach, success is not guaranteed, because what students must do is not merely shift attention to the classroom, but change an entire mental set, with its accompanying skills, values, attitudes, knowledge, and modes of attention. There is no guarantee that a class can shift from talking excitedly about entertainment to writing meaningfully about it, because the shift into the Educational Channel may be more complex and unfamiliar than disengaged students (or innovative teachers) realize. The result might be, for some students, the kind of writing they can accomplish while their minds are still tuned to the Entertainment Channel. Exploring the shift from, say, the Entertainment Channel to the Educational Channel could make an interesting study.

Attention and Cognitive Set

Theories of learning tend to be atomistic in treating learning as a series of component parts. The approach in this article emphasizes the way numerous elements normally group into modes of focus, here called "channels." The usual instruction for the student to "pay attention" may be better served by helping students make a wholesale

shift from one mode of attention to the mode of attention required by the learning activity at that time. The channels of attention described in this article are proposed here as mental sets that bring a specific way of focusing attention, responsiveness, vocabulary, gesture, action, prior knowledge, sense of appropriateness, goals, and procedures. Many athletes develop such modes of focus in which any element can be isolated, but where all the parts function as an integrated whole; students may learn better if taught to develop similar modes of focus – what we have called switching to the “Educational Channel.” Engaging in a learning activity requires a whole shift of context, engaging many cognitive skills, not just paying more attention – particularly among students who have brought competing mental sets into the classroom.

It would be interesting to find out which external actions, activities, or symbols have been successfully used to help students make the shift to the educational channel, and how successful students make such shifts on their own.

Limitations

There are many kinds of teachers who succeed in many kinds of classrooms, and this model is not intended to detract from their methods. However, those teachers owe the student and that student’s future teachers an obligation to help train that student in how to learn in the classroom – how to learn from a variety of different instructional approaches in a variety of different classroom settings. For students in college or headed for college, teachers need to provide guidance and practice in the kinds of self-direction and learning strategies that make learning possible in college classrooms, from small seminars to huge lecture halls.

Like many sweeping explanations of human problems, the model presented in this paper is both persuasive and dubious. I not only argue for this model, I argue with it. Could these multiple modes be replaced by a simpler concept, perhaps one that describes a continuum rather than a cluster of mental sets? Or a model that contrasts oral and literate?

I have attempted to develop the concept--be it right or wrong-- and make it clear.

Implications for research

Identifying Student Channels

Student channels are much easier to understand than learning styles or cultural styles, but there might be some value in developing instruments to track them and to track changes in individual students. It might be more useful to distinguish the relatively superficial channels from deeper cultural styles and inborn learning styles, so teachers can recognize the relative seriousness of each.

Appropriateness

Success in the classroom and on a job depends on a person's ability to change to a channel that activates the appropriate kinds of attention, skills, and responses. How do people learn to recognize that they have entered a new context that requires different responses of them? How do they learn what those responses are? How do they make the shift from one context to another? How do they learn the concept of appropriateness? How do they learn to shift behavior in a new context without feeling that they are being inauthentic?

What methods help students tune into the Educational Channel before beginning class work? Do start-of-class rituals help? Might it help to train students to use a set action, gesture, and/or internal instruction to change to the kind of focus needed for class, tests, or other focused performance?

How can teachers and students learn to identify when students have shifted away from the Educational Channel during class? How can students be taught to monitor their own focus, to identify a shift in focus, and to choose an appropriate focus?

Why do some kinds of students have greater difficulty than others in shifting contexts? What helps?

Student Solutions

Presented with the model in this paper, what ways do students propose for identifying when they are on a competing channel and changing to the educational channel? How do they respond to the idea that they often need to shift to the channel that is appropriate in a given context?

Channels of Adult Learners

Do adult learners bring to class other channels of attention they learned from contexts or media that are not a strong influence on today's students? How do those channels influence the classroom focus of adult learners? How can teachers identify such channels and build on them?

Implications for teaching

This section is phrased as advice to teachers:

Do not assume that student differences indicate inborn learning styles or ingrained cultural styles until you have considered whether they might instead be inappropriate responses to the learning situation based on what students already know.

Don't expect students by themselves to figure out the complexities of the Educational Channel. Do not expect parents or other teachers to have completed the job of teaching students how to behave productively in class. Teachers always have to teach the Educational Channel as an essential part of a student's learning skills. Teachers at all levels, like it or not, inherit the task of continuing to socialize students to the classroom in a productive way. Learning is a complex undertaking, and there is never a time -- not even at the doctoral level -- when a teacher can assume that students have mastered the art of learning.

Help students learn how to learn in a variety of settings, starting with learning from a teacher in a classroom.

Recognize the powerful influence of other learned roles in students' lives (such as the Channels described in this paper) and how those may compete for control of the classroom.

Be wary of approaches that adapt the classroom to roles students bring with them, including learning styles and cultural styles. Use those roles, instead, as points of departure for developing the role of learner. Make sure that the thumb controlling the imaginary TV remote is yours.

Give practice and success in the competence that comes from acquiring new skills, from focus, from learning. Help students experience and build upon the satisfaction of becoming competent in new knowledge and skills.

Recognize the capacity for flexibility that most students already have. Assist them in consciously learning to shift their mental sets in response to new contexts. Help students learn to master the roles that are appropriate in new contexts without losing their sense of personal and cultural identity.

Remember that the classroom is a transitional environment, and that the world is the real teacher. The goal of organized education is to produce self-directed lifelong learners who can learn well alone, with others, and in the different settings available to them throughout life.

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Click [HERE](#) for a list of accompanying Tables.

Appendix: Examples from Literature

There are many examples in literature where one character competes with another to control the context and define not only the actions in that context but the very meaning of what takes place. The idea behind this paper derives in part from these examples.

Hamlet. When Hamlet stages the play-within-the-play, King Claudius understands the event to be an evening's entertainment. Hamlet understands it to be a trap set to catch the conscience of the King. Claudius thinks he is watching the entertainment channel; Hamlet switches it to the cops channel and proves -- at least to himself -- that Claudius is Denmark's Most Wanted.

Iago. In *Othello* Iago manipulates others into interpreting the meaning of events in terms of his grim script. In the handkerchief scene, the audience understands how Cassio obtained Desdemona's handkerchief (through Iago's ruse), and is handing it to Bianca because he likes the design and wants her to make a copy of it. But we watch Iago persuade Othello, just out of earshot of Cassio, that Cassio obtained the handkerchief by being Desdemona's lover and is now passing it along casually to his whore. Iago redefines the meaning of what Othello sees. He changes the channel Othello is tuned to -- from the channel of love and loyalty to the channel of jealousy and revenge.

Don Quixote. One of the delights of Don Quixote is how he imposes his script upon every context he enters, in a manner so powerful that others are often drawn into it. When he retreats to the remote mountains to imitate absurd acts of knightly penance like the ones he has read about, his friends come to rescue him. They come -- not as themselves, to talk him out of his madness -- but disguised in roles that fit the imaginary drama Don Quixote is acting in. They play in his script; they have changed to his channel.

The book develops this theme by moving from scenes where the knight's vision is clearly ridiculous (attacking windmills, thinking they are giants), to scenes where others humor Don Quixote as a madman (the innkeeper who knighted him), to scenes where participants get caught up in playing roles in Don Quixote's drama (the penance scene just mentioned), through scenes that challenge you to question the meanings imposed upon people by social contexts (freeing the prisoners; the many times Don Quixote treats lower-class people as royalty), into the luminous borderland where the tattered knight's absurd idealism produces transcendent experiences in the skeptical participants (the Cave of Montesinos). Throughout, the recurring theme is how the imagination imposes roles and meanings onto contexts that at first appear to have a different meaning -- and how the recalcitrant world both resists and responds to that imagination.

Like Don Quixote, some students arrive at class with their minds on ideals and roles they learned from media -- just as Don Quixote learned his from reading too many books about chivalry. And they seek to redefine the classroom to fit with their imagined realities. Teachers need to honor the transformative potential of students' imaginations, without playing roles that the students control.

