

“the gait keepers rule”

"We are all ... responsible for creating the social world, albeit under conditions others have arranged for us" (McDermott & Raley, 2009, p. 436).

In the absence of critical theory, life is deceptively simple, consisting of little more than a progression of learning from, and acting upon, the world between the bookends of birth and death. Under a more analytic lens, however, we find that what we learn in this process are reduced, stylized modes of interaction long since removed from their underlying motivations. Like language, these displays are instilled in us through gradually joining in conversation with social actors already immersed in the dialogue. Also like language, the early adoption of these displays make difficult any attempt to comprehend alternative expressions. As we master these social elements and make them our own, we become the "gait keepers," masters of stylization who label the world according to our inherited modes of thought. The solution to breaking this cycle can be found in our most precious resource: emergent generations of children who, if provided with opportunities to forge new, embodied cognitive relationships with the world, might teach us (and future generations) new things of value.

The Great Fallacy

The process by which social structures and knowledge are sustained over time is exemplified by Hutchins's description of readiness maintenance in the military establishment (1993). Like a great skeleton, the artifacts of war provide a framework through which an ever flowing stream of human actors provide animation via collaboration. In turn, new initiates learn both animating tasks and sustained social constructs, as external interactions yield stylized, internal representations that become "increasingly detached from the conditions of bodily-engagement-with-the-world that gave rise to them" (Hutchins, 2006, p.8). The great fallacy, as described by Goffman (1979), is the attribution of the outward manifestations of these internal stylizations to the Doctrine of Natural Expression, rather than as products of socialization. Unwittingly, we each join in the process of embodying and reinforcing potentially arbitrary, or worse, detrimental, social preferences.

Education as Solution

Although McDermott and Raley (2009) describe education as the forum in which children are readily defined in context of pervasive social structures, it also holds the potential for rectifying the system itself. Specifically, the very process of generating internal knowledge from outward exploration may be employed in schools to engender true learning and generate new knowledge. First, we must rid ourselves of the common belief, as expressed by Goffman, that "the child giving something of equivalence in exchange for the rearing that he gets is ludicrous" (1979, p. 4). Rather, value may be evinced by facilitating the role of child as teacher to immediate underclassmen, just as the endless stream of quartermasters in Hutchins's observations find themselves in both subordinate learning and superordinate expert roles. In response to objections that this might introduce errors into learning environments, we need only recall Hutchins's claim that "some nonzero amount of error . . . will not in ordinary circumstances harm performance; however, every error correction event is a learning context, not just for the person who commits the error but for all who witness it" (1993, p. 58). In an environment in which error is celebrated as a fundamental stage of learning, children will be afforded the opportunity to engage in the process of building internal knowledge representations from initial environmental interactions, rather than be presented with packaged solutions that inhibit exploration and discovery - the very skills required by quartermasters in averting a potential disaster when their "packaged solution" had failed (Hutchins, 2006, pp. 5-7). In this process, children would be afforded the freedom to construct new modes of thinking that might augment, rather than merely reinforce, their encompassing culture and society.