

## The Centerless Curriculum

By Elijah Mirochnik



*Maria/Madonna, Digital Collage,  
by Elijah Mirochnik, 2000*

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Many of the teachers that I know find it most useful to ally themselves with theorists, whose notions about what should and shouldn't be done in the classroom, fits well with their own notions of "good" educational practice. Today, many theorists present themselves as champions of "child-centered" classroom practices. These champions of the child, explicitly or secretly, derive their ideas from John Dewey, who spent most of his life urging teachers to abandon, once and for all, the ancient definition of knowledge as a pure, eternal, preexisting thing that, like truth, awaits discovery, and replace it with the

understanding that knowledge is made, not found.<sup>1</sup>

Over the course of the twentieth century Dewey became the theorist's theorist and, in turn, become a favorite among teachers who chose to ally themselves with those Deweyan "child-centered" theorists that they felt they needed to convince the authorities (parents, administrators, school boards, state departments of education) that what they did in their

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classrooms should be admired rather than admonished. What I find curious about theorists whose stories about educational practices fall into categories like critical pedagogy, Frierean education, constructivist teaching, and reconceptualist curriculum, is that so many who wave flags within these camps have not yet overcome Dewey's vocabulary of "child centered" teaching and learning. Instead of abandoning the need to define classroom practice in terms of some one center, many contemporary theorists, who ally themselves with the camps that I just mentioned, have tended to shift the location of authority away from the teacher's view of the world toward the way that children see it.

In some ways I myself am quite fine with, and very supportive of, the shift to teaching that puts the child's interests at the center of curriculum theory and practice. The shift of center has resulted in the legitimization of practices that I greatly prefer over the traditional set of practices that raise the teacher to the status of the all-knowing pedagogue whose tool-kit includes acceptable techniques of harming, punishing, shaming, and silencing, all in the name of Knowledge, Truth and Citizenship.

At the same time, in order to leave the past that Dewey urged we leave behind, we need to wean ourselves off of narratives in which teaching is thought to be an enterprise that requires a center: a center that serves as the good cause to be supported, the calling to be humbled by, the politically correct stance to be fought for, or the research agenda that will inevitably lead to scientific progress. I think that it is useful to understand that a move from a "truth-centered" or "teacher-centered" curricula to a "child-centered" curricula doesn't get us out of Plato's, or Descartes', or The Modern, paradigm.

While it's true that the move from teacher to child as a center of classroom practice gives those of us who practice new ways of teaching some new ways of convincing our critics that what we are doing is legitimate, we end up playing a game that we profess to have left behind; we end up thinking along with Plato and Descartes, that all things have a center, and it is the power of the center that keeps everything together – that makes the whole cohere. Within our "inevitable center" frame of mind, we end up thinking that some people have more access to the big picture of how the center-and-all-its-myriad-parts works, which relegates the rest of us to the role of humble followers, grateful for the genius possessed by those who have made the new center so concrete, so understandable, so wonderfully transparent.

Dewey's shift from a vocabulary of knowledge found to a vocabulary in which knowledge is made has helped postmodern theorists (like Susan Bordo, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean Baudrillard, see references) construct a new way of talking about identity. Within new postmodern conversations about what the self is, or what one's identity is, the self is made rather than discovered. The postmodern rejection of the notion of the self as something that pre-exists, something that we are born with, something that lay in our deepest depths, that awaits our discovery, is entirely connected to the postmodern rejection of knowledge as a pure, untouched, pre-existing, eternal thing that awaits discovery.<sup>2</sup>

Within traditional modern and pre-modern narratives there is a tendency to connect the idea of the purity of knowledge with the “purity of the soul.” Traditionally, the vocabulary that has been made available to us for talking about, thinking about, and acting out our identities within our classrooms has been one in which core aspects of teachers’ personal selves have been inextricably linked to that set of universal characteristics that Pure and Perfect human beings were assumed to have possessed. The authors of the traditional script for classroom life and conduct bridged who a teacher was with what a teacher did by closely following the ancient principle that good individuals contained within them those traits that reflected the universal standards for Goodness, Purity and Perfection that applied to humanity as a whole. Today, both the idea that there is naturally a bodily “center” that contains a pure soul, and that there naturally exists a curricular “center” that contains the essence of “best practices,” are cut from the same Platonic paradigmatic cloth.<sup>3</sup>

It is useful to recognize that the narrative about teaching that supports the shift from teacher-centered to student-centered curricula is cut from the Platonic cloth that narrowly defines how we teachers should and shouldn’t think of who we are and what we do on our classrooms. It makes me very uncomfortable when I hear about the shift from a teacher-centered to child-centered curriculum, that prescribes, for me, a new and better and ready-made identity to adopt, and at the same time prescribes for me a new and better and ready-made sets of theories and practices to adopt.

When Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligence theory was published in the early eighties, my teacher colleagues and I felt that we finally had the scientific and intellectual ammunition we needed to back up what we were doing in our classrooms all along: trying to get individual students engaged in the classroom through their own particular ways of learning. But instead of taking the realization that we were already doing Multiple Intelligence in our classrooms, even before Gardner’s book arrived, as a signal that we had control of our practices and identities, we fell into our old habit of humbling ourselves to a power outside of our classrooms. And so, we concluded it was Gardner, not ourselves, who was the expert, the researcher, the talented, the learned, the knowing.

In response to the critical acclaim that Gardner’s book received, and the new alliances we were forging with administrators who bought into Multiple Intelligence Theory’s scientific presentation, we flocked to workshops, consumed any book written about, watched every video that was out there, that told us how to do Multiple Intelligence in our classrooms. We thought that we were new, but in retrospect we were doing what our teacher ancestors had always done in the Western history of teaching: we adopted our identities and set of practices based what was handed down to us by an outside expert.

The Maria/Madonna collage that I created was my personal attempt at abandoning the idea that teachers need to develop both a curriculum-center and an identity-center. Creating the collage helped me challenge the old notion that both the center-point of classroom practice and the knowledge that drives the center are

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inevitably predetermined by higher powers, or by the scientific yearning for progress. In the process of constructing the collage I started dropping the need for a predetermined curriculum center and identity-center and its inevitably linked predetermined sets of best practices, and I began entering into a process of weaning myself off of the old distinction between knowledge as pure disembodied truth and knowledge as emergent within my own embodied experience of feeling and being in my classroom world.

Why did I choose Madonna and Montessori as the vehicles for my exploration into the possibility of riding myself of the habit of thinking that I was born with an identity at my center of my being, or that there needed to be a center to my classroom? I was not sure why at first. I don't worry about knowing why at the beginning of artistic investigations like the one I am describing. But as I went along, I started thinking some new thoughts about the multiple selves that Madonna presented in her string of 1980s videos.

In creating the collage I began to understand the process by which Madonna unstitched the Hollywood fabricated prototype of the perfectly flawless female, as I began to realize how deftly she deconstructed media portraits of perfection by using them toward her own ends, and then tossing them out, one after the next, at her whim. It began to dawn on me that the existence of a "Real" Madonna was not her idea about herself; it was my idea; it was her audience's idea, *not* hers. As I worked on the collage, in which I purposely chose traditional educator (Montessori) and a non-traditional educator (Madonna), I remembered video after video that revealed a new Madonna after new Madonna, and in reflection it became apparent to me that she had discarded the notion that her identity had to fit the entertainment industry's, or her audience's, or anyone else's picture of who she was.

The process of creating the collage has led me to see Madonna as an author of cultural theory, and by framing her in this way I can see how her methods of creating cultural curricula can be applied to the creation of classroom curriculum. Following Madonna's cultural curricula, I feel I can create my own picture of myself as a teacher based on my own set of whims, interests, desires and talents. I would rather engage in the sort of curriculum-making as self-making that I have learned from Madonna, than follow Maria Montessori in thinking that what I do and who I am in the classroom serves a higher cause or a higher power.<sup>4</sup>

What does applying a Madonna cultural curriculum to my classroom curriculum get me? It gets me away from the vocabulary that has been made available to me for talking about, thinking about, and acting out my identities within my classroom. It makes we want to try speaking about myself and my classroom without thinking that who I am as a teacher is inextricably linked to that set of universal characteristics that Perfect human beings are assumed to possess. It gets me out of an ancient kind of thinking that assumes that good individuals contain within themselves those traits that reflect the universal standards for Goodness and Perfection that applied to humanity as a whole.

It gets me to think that I am an authority in my classroom because I author the set of experiences that become my text for what to do, and who to be, as a teacher. It helps me live with a fear that all too often haunts and horrifies me: that when I look back at my life of teaching that I will not see myself, but rather I will see someone who has imitated the teachers of his past. It gets me to take a breath and hope that by making my classroom a space where I can try some things that my teachers would never have imagined trying, I might just invent some curriculum (and at the same time invent and reinvent my self) that frees me from the past and enables me to live a teacher's life that I can call my own.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, John Dewey (1938). See also Westbrook (1991).

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller description of central role that absolute truth (or discovered truth) has played within Platonic, Cartesian, and Modern European and North American systems of thought see the first three chapters of my book (Elijah Mirochnik's *Teaching in the First Person* (2000).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Rorty rejects the Platonic/Modern notion of a pre-determined (centered) self, replacing it with a self that he defines as a "centerless web of beliefs and desires;" a self that is "a centerless bundle of contingencies, of the sort which both Foucault and Dewey shared with Nietzsche." Rorty's philosophical writings, in this regard, have helped me understand the difference between traditional and postmodern curricula as the difference between curricula that require a center and curricula that are emergent and situational, and therefore free of predetermined centers as a rationale for their existence. (See Rorty (1991) pages 1 and 197.) In addition, Patrick Diamond and Carol Mullen's (2002) imaginative investigations of the teacher's self are very useful in understanding current postmodern positions that reject traditional static, essentialist conceptions of identity.

<sup>4</sup> For a fuller description of ways in which Madonna's works reflect a new conception of identity see my essay (Elijah Mirochnik's "The Possibilities of Passion" (pp. 7-36) in *Passion and Pedagogy* (2000).

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