

THE EXPLOITING BUSINESS

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exploit (eksplɔɪt) *n.* [ME. & OFr. *exploit* < L. *explicitum*, neut. pp. of *explicare*: see EXPLICATE] an act remarkable for brilliance or daring; bold deed –*vt.* 1. to make use of; turn to account; utilize productively 2. to make unethical use of for one's own advantage or profit; specif., to make profit from the labor of (others).¹

Introduction

At the PES 2000 Conference in Toronto, Virginia Held was invited as a distinguished speaker and she delivered an address titled “The Commercialization of the Classroom.” Philosophers of education in attendance seemed taken aback at some of the examples of commercial intrusion in K-12 schooling--and rightly so. Commercialization in schools is expanding at an alarming rate. According to the Center for the Analysis of Commercialism in Education, school-business partnerships have increased their presence in North America by 303 percent since 1990.² Examples of school leaders entering into exclusive contracts, renting advertising space on the sides of school buses, and providing businesses with a captive audience (and lucrative market) abound. In Colorado Springs, the director of school leadership for District 11 sent a memo reminding teachers and administrators that in order to profit from the exclusive contract the district had signed with Coca-Cola, students needed extra breaks from class to consume 70,000 cases of Coke products.³ In schools throughout the United States, Pizza Hut offers “free” pizza for students who not only complete reading assignments in order to get the “free” pizza, but who are also too young to go to the restaurant to redeem their free pizza alone (resulting in an average bill of \$16.50 and profit for Pizza Hut).⁴ In Fresno, California, math and science lessons

included the McGraw-Hill middle school textbook that used Oreo cookies, Nike shoes, and McDonald's meals as sample lessons.⁵ In Georgia, Colgate-Palmolive offers dental care charts and pamphlets emphasizing "five easy steps" of gum care, replete with suggestions to buy "Colgate Junior" toothbrushes and toothpaste.⁶

Such an encroachment of commercialism and consumer materialism in schools appears to have put teachers and students in an awkward position. Since school funding has been tied so tightly to property taxes, some schools find themselves "forced" into school-business partnerships. The argument here is that it is better to get money for students in exchange for advertising and commercialism than to have students suffer in under-funded schools. Given that educational reform initiatives are based on policies of accountability that are increasingly linked to school funding (i.e., teachers must "prove" that they are "doing their jobs" where "doing their jobs" equals teaching to standardized tests based on central office goals and objectives lists that impact budgets), teachers and school leaders have, on one view, been savvy enough to identify alternative funding sources. The problem with this kind of alternative funding source is at least twofold: (1) the giving is contingent and uncertain; and (2) it generally represents a very small percentage of overall school budgets--raising questions about the amount of time and energy put into "partnership" initiatives. This paper uses the term "exploit" in the two major ways it is defined. The argument is that school-business partnerships exploit schools in the sense that they "make unethical use of [schools] for [their] own advantage or profit." The ultimate intention of this paper, however, is to champion the other definition of the term in order "to make use of, turn to account, [and] utilize productively" school-business partnerships as object lessons for students' critical analysis. Specifically, this paper asserts that standard school-business partnerships promote

consumer materialism, thwart critical transitivity, and negatively alter what it means to be a citizen. The potential to transform standard partnerships, however, is latent in the standard partnerships themselves. This paper intends to show why exploiting (in the first sense of the actual definition) the potential of the standard partnership is as important as it is difficult to achieve, nonetheless holding out hope that transformation will take place in U.S. public schools.

Consumerism and Transitivity

Consumer materialism and critical transitivity are, in relation to school-business partnerships, intertwined concepts. Consumer materialism is the focus on goods and ends only or primarily. Perhaps best characterized by students wanting to know whether they are going to “get” their “money’s worth” for a course, consumer materialism circumvents process in favor of product. Consumer materialism is also the valuing of easy answers over difficult investigation. Linked to convenience, consumer materialism manifests itself in schools via business partnerships when the ends or goods (e.g., Coca-Cola, “free” pizza, trips to amusement parks, t-shirts, etc.) become the focus and where the focus is not analyzed or investigated. Said differently, consumer materialism commodifies existence by reducing searching, being, thinking, etc., to objectified and reductionistic particulars. For schooling, it means, in part, that students see their roles as seeking “right” answers to questions instead of searching for meaning and understanding by contesting and critiquing. Similarly, teachers see their roles as seeking preordained procedures that will allow the efficient transfer of information from them (or the adopted texts/curriculum) to their students.⁷ Accordingly, teachers demonstrate consumer materialism when they participate in school-business partnerships without questioning and analyzing the ideological, symbolic, and practical consequences of partnering with the private sector in overtly commercialist ways.

Critical transitivity is best understood when compared to two other levels of awareness—intransitivity and semitransitivity. The phrases come from Paulo Freire and intransitivity means “noncritical (in)action.” He clarifies that intransitivity repudiates the power of individuals to change their existences when, for example, teachers claim “I can’t speak out about school-business partnerships because my school might lose funding . . . that’s the ‘real world’ and I can’t do anything about it.”⁸ Differently, semitransitivity is characterized by individuals who see the world as changeable, but see the world in unrelated segments such that semitransitivity is two-dimensional and short term. Business groups may donate money, time, or materials, for example, but teachers do not ask whether businesses are getting tax credits, free advertising, or other “perks.”⁹ While intransitivity and semitransitivity are visible in schools, Freire’s ultimate goal—critical transitivity—is rarely evidenced. Critical transitivity is demonstrated when individuals make, according to Shor, “broad connections between individual experience and social issues In education, critically [transitive] teachers and students synthesize personal and social meanings with a specific theme, text, or issue.”¹⁰ Students and teachers who critique school-business partnerships (in this case) rather than seek them out and/or participate in them without question, are demonstrating, in minor form, what critical transitivity entails. The point of critical transitivity in relation to school-business partnerships is to engage students and teachers in debates and arguments over, for example, the motives for business involvement in schools, the benefits from partnerships for schools versus the benefits for businesses, and what is gained and lost in specific partnerships. Are businesses altruistic in their “support”? How much time and money is spent by school districts in “human hours” securing and maintaining partnerships? If businesses paid non-reduced taxes (i.e., many businesses get tax reductions for locating in particular areas), would the dollar

amount of their “contributions” to schools be greater or smaller than what they would have paid if they had not received a tax break? These are the kinds of questions that characterize critical transitivity and are also questions that, by virtue of their being formed and asked, also challenge consumer materialist assumptions regarding easy answers and convenient, simple conclusions.

Critically transitive debate and argument utilizes processes of investigation that do not accept the impervious realities that Maxine Greene calls the “givens” of an imposed “real world.”¹¹ In this sense, students would be better off being young philosophers of education: questioning their own schooling at the very time they are engaged in it. Unfortunately, opportunities for questioning are limited as testing-, grading-, and preparation for future life-oriented curricula (i.e., pro consumerism, job and workforce preparation, skills-oriented approaches) crowd out chances for such investigation. The concern here is that business partnerships inherently inhibit questioning and instead help develop uncritical consumers rather than critically transitive citizens. This happens, in part, by their institutionalized nature. Accepted by schools and reinforced in society, business assumptions that value consumer materialism and *intransitivity* become “beyond question.” Accordingly, unwilling or unable to raise questions (for fear of losing funding? in- or semitransitivity?), teachers and school leaders often demonstrate for their students what it means to accede to the “given” of commercialism and consumer materialism. One result is that schools harbor non-criticality and confer diplomas to students (and employ teachers and administrators) who are unable (and/or unwilling?) to raise questions about motive, meaning, and any ultimate consequences of supporting business influences on and in schools. A cycle is established, therefore, where business expectations for schools beget schools that push products, provide free advertising, and “produce” future consumers (consumer materialists) that, in turn,

favor and support business interests and corporate involvement in public schooling. Some call this a “win-win” situation, but who wins what? Who wins how much? Who wins in the long run?

While a compelling case might be made to get rid of school-business partnerships altogether, this paper offers a way in which schools can continue their “partnerships” yet still promote critical transitivity and critical citizenship on the part of the teachers and students alike. Three primary claims are made here: (1) schools are currently places where commercialism is rapidly intruding; (2) students, teachers, and leaders rarely critique commercial intrusion (resulting in uncritical consumers and uncritical citizens); and (3) if schools are forced into “partnerships” with businesses,¹² one way that commercialism can be exploited to avoid uncritical consumerism and uncritical citizenship is to use the partnerships, themselves, as object lessons.

(1) Commercial Intrusion, Profit Margins, and (2) Missed Opportunities for Critique

In virtually every neighborhood grocery store, one will find a program where a percentage of sales will be “donated” to local schools. In Michigan, Glen’s Markets has a “Save-Share 2000” plan. The store, like most others, provides a “value card” and customers “swipe” their card at a machine located at the register. From the total bill, one percent will be “donated” to a school the shopper designates. Interestingly, the store does not keep track of the individual contributions so that those who shop at the store have no idea whether their contribution was actually made.¹³ Harris Teeter has a similar program. They boasted, in a letter to River Eves Elementary School (Roswell, GA), that they “gave away \$500,000 to 1,955 schools” in 1998.¹⁴ Each school, in other words, received \$255.75. Like Glen’s (and Kroger, Publix, Acme, Bruno’s, Stop-n-Shop, etc.), Harris Teeter uses schools as no-cost marketing tools for their stores. In the letter to River Eves Elementary, Harris Teeter informed

the school that it had only \$8.78 earmarked for its school. Since the company will not cut a check for an amount less than \$250 (but keeps the interest accrued on such funds?), the school was sent a list of ideas “to increase [their] dollars earned.” The suggestions included posting the Harris Teeter account number on the school’s marquee as well as in sight of the car pool line. Harris Teeter’s account number would not, of course, be listed without the name “Harris Teeter” next to it, as an account number means nothing if it is not connected with the store name or the project that goes along with it. The suggestions also included advertising the program in the school newsletter, announcing the program at school events and PTA meetings, and copying reminder cards to be distributed to parents. For \$250, Harris Teeter gets free advertising in a variety of ways (the school marquee, newsletters, handouts, and announcements) and the school spends money and time on paper, printing, and “human hours” devoted to advertising. The “River Eves Eagles Newsletter” did, indeed, include a “front page” headline proclaiming “Hooray for River Eves Business Partners.”¹⁵

Coca-Cola has a summer “economics” institute program to expose minority students to the benefits of competitive business practices. Nissan automobile dealerships participate in “automotive services apprenticeships.” CiCi’s Pizza sets aside one night per month when students and parents from participating schools come to the restaurant. A percentage of the net sales (not gross) is “donated” to the school. Subway provides “free” subs to a local school and a representative from the store, in order to make an “educational” link, comes to the school as a guest speaker on “health occupations.” McDonald’s secures itself as part of a cafeteria “choice” program in a Colorado school and offers business credit to students who “intern” as cooks and servers. Channel One is connected to thousands of classrooms, providing students with a news program and commercials for jeans, candy, makeup, and

other “targeted” products. Tucker Federal Bank and Wachovia Bank participate in an “Academy of Finance” program which claims to prepare students for “rewarding careers” in the financial services industry. In August 2000, National Public Radio reported the case of a father in Ohio who is suing his local school (with the help of the American Civil Liberties Union) to stop the school from giving student information to local banks who contact students about setting up savings accounts. The principal of the school, demonstrating either intransitivity or semitransitivity, interpreted the suit as a nuisance and he defended the bank as being a “friend to the school.”

The General Accounting Office (GAO) recently came out with a report warning of the increase in commercialization in schools. As noted in a *New York Times* article,

The G.A.O. report cites textbook covers distributed by Clairol, Ralph Lauren, and Philip Morris with company names and logos fully displayed. In New York City, the Board of Education is considering a plan that would provide computers for all of its students, starting in the fourth grade. The computers might carry ads and possibly encourage shopping on a particular Web site.¹⁶

Far from being limited to supermarket programs, school-business partnerships are increasing in number and variety and arguably represent a larger, insidious agenda. The agenda is a pro-business, pro-capitalist, pro-careerist one that excludes questions about whether business is exploitative of workers and consumers (and schools), whether capitalism is the only or best economic theory, and whether elementary school students should be forced to consider their entire future based *not* on “What do you want to *be* when you grow up?” questions, but “What do you want to *do* when you grow up?” questions. To be clear, capitalism *may* be the best economic theory (“at least compared to all the rest,” as the oft-cited proviso goes), but the claim here is not to have the assumption accepted (and furthered) without investigation.

To illustrate the agenda identified above, many city and county chambers of commerce publish booklets touting the advantages of school-business partnerships, all the while (understandably?) excluding questions or concerns or potential problems with such partnerships. One chamber of commerce lists the benefits of school-business partnerships as follows: “Present firsthand requirements, satisfactions, and expectations of the business world. . .Alert teachers to the job skills applicants need and help them find ways to develop these skills. . .Help develop career awareness geared to specific local job-market needs both now and in the future. . .Gain understanding of the school systems, whose health is vital to the economic well being of the community. . .Become known as a community involved company which adds to your public relations efforts.”¹⁷

Note the slant. The benefits are for businesses, but schools are referred to in ways that assume them to be beneficiaries as well. While “win-win” situations may exist, it simply does not follow, in this particular example anyway, that the benefits for schools are anything more than residual and they appear always linked to the kind of fiscal policies that primarily favor businesses. Teachers are supposed to teach their students what businesses desire in terms of “job skills.” Businesses benefit from learning more about schools, but for the purpose of the “economic well-being of the community.” To the possible question “why should my business get involved,” the chamber of commerce already provides the answer: so your business will be perceived as being involved in the community, “which adds to your public relations efforts.”

Schools, then, are faced with programs connecting them with businesses while also having outside forces further the idea that schools and businesses should become even more closely aligned.¹⁸ The problem with this is that students and teachers become subsumed in a market logic that, in part

because of its pervasiveness, appears (therefore becomes) impervious to critique.¹⁹

(3) Commercialism Exploited: An Example

In university communications departments, students study television and print advertisements for their symbolism, hidden messages, overt messages, aesthetics, etc. Guided by experts in the field, meanings intended by advertisers--as well as meanings other than those intended by advertisers--are identified, revealed, and debated. Much like textual analysis, literary criticism, and hermeneutics, the ads become fodder for investigation. School-business partnerships offer the same opportunity. How might such an opportunity be realized? How might public schools use school-business partnerships as opportunities for the development of critical transitivity? Consider one example.

After studying school-business partnerships, critical transitivity, and a variety of other related topics during a recent summer term, a student returned to her classroom. Her intention was to explore the possibility that her fifth grade students might alter the climate of their classroom by altering the school-business program she operated to fund set production for school musicals. Relating her experiences, the student noted the following:

I had to let you know about several classroom conversations today. You'd have been proud. I introduced my fifth graders to a new concept--critical transitivity! I shared with them my dilemma regarding the "Box Tops for Education" [General Mills initiative whereby tops from cereal boxes are collected for money] fund raiser for the coming year. We talked about the large profit margin for General Mills and the free advertising I'd provided for the past two years. I then asked them why General Mills would want to "help" schools like this. After a brief silence, one little boy said, "They want to control schools." Another little girl corrected him and said, "they want to manipulate schools!" I almost fell over in amazement. From the mouths of babes! "We" decided, collectively, not to continue the Box Tops campaign. So, one small effort has been made in developing critical transitivity in the lives of 60 children.²⁰

Only anecdotal evidence, and only in one classroom, the example nonetheless gives us a glimpse of the challenge. Forget for the moment that the teacher considered the change a success. One might, for example, justifiably wonder whether the teacher is accurate in her assessment that the students actually “learned” or “demonstrated” critical transitivity. They might have been led to the conclusion the teacher wanted and thus void the larger claim. Yet, there might be enough of a glimpse in what the teacher wrote to suggest that she really did demonstrate the larger point being made here. Including the students in the consideration is key, even though the set-up was suggested (that the teacher had a dilemma regarding the “Box Tops for Education” program). Their responses, little cynics though they may appear, indicate a level of sophistication and understanding that, should teachers get out of the way of them, would emerge naturally.

Getting the teacher to consider a side other than the one she had been practicing for two years was not an easy process, however. This particular teacher was not initially willing to consider that the business she courted could be seen as anything other than helpful. It took a variety of examples and corresponding analyses to move the student from reactionary to contemplator. Indeed, her revelation and refutation of her pre-existing beliefs—her *elenchus*, if you will—resulted in her proclaiming, as though she just realize she had been “had” or “taken,” that she had been a “Captain Crunch pimp” for years.

Consider some guiding questions:

- 1) What is the primary reason for entering into a school-business partnership?
- 2) Whose interests are being served? Who benefits most? Who benefits in the long run?
- 3) How much time is given to the business part of the school-business partnership? What amount, in terms of teacher (or administrator) salary, does the time equal on an hourly basis?

- 4) What is learned as a result of the partnership? In addition to the claims associated with specific projects, what is the larger message or meaning being conveyed to students?
- 5) Are business partners willing to share financial information with teachers and students regarding their benefits from the partnership?
- 6) Can individual teachers or classes opt out of partnership programs?

These and other questions should form the basis of an initial analysis of school-business partnerships. The student in the example asked at least some of these and used them to guide her actions.

The overall point here is to illustrate how using school-business partnerships as object lessons goes toward, if not fully achieving, critical transitivity and critical consumerism. The teacher noted, in fact, that “one small effort has been made in developing critical transitivity.” It is not a complete package to be “had” just because one program was thwarted, even though the teacher and the students came to the conclusion collectively. What other programs, inside or outside the specific school in the example, might also offer opportunities for further critique? Such a question goes to the Deweyan point that problems solved only reveal other problems to be solved in such a way that habits of the mind are formed from educative experiences. The example is not (yet) educative in the sense that we do not know whether further learning and further educative experiences obtained. Still, Dewey would have to be pleased that students were engaged, actions were taken, and a problem was identified and (temporarily?) solved.

One caution from the suggestion, of course, is that teachers have plenty of curriculum mandates to keep them chasing objectives, goals, and testable material. Adding to the curriculum is not the intention here. Instead, the point is to take what is already a part of school life—and an increasing part of

school life—and raise questions about it. The not-so-covert intention here is to reveal how school-business partnerships are pushing uncritical consumerism into what businesses no longer consider schools, but markets. For the utilitarianism and reductionism of such a viewpoint to go unchallenged will mean giving over to businesses the markets they so eagerly crave. Business interests are in making money, schooling interests are not. Careerist though many public schools may be, the claim here is that we will do ourselves a favor by putting school-business partnerships and commercialism under the hypothetical microscope. The favor is one which combats oligarchical power, i.e., corporate interests directing and controlling government (which leads to governmental favors for businesses). Recall

Dewey in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*:

In spite of its interest in a thoroughly social aim, utilitarianism fostered a new class interest, that of the capitalistic property-owning interests, provided only property was obtained through free competition and not by governmental favor. The stress that Bentham put on security tended to consecrate the legal institution of private property provided only certain legal abuses in connection with its acquisition and transfer were abolished. *Beati possidentes*—provided possessions had been obtained in accord with the rules of the competitive game—without, that is, extraneous favors from government. Thus utilitarianism gave intellectual confirmation to all those tendencies which make “business” not a means of social service and an opportunity for personal growth in creative power but a way of accumulating the means of private enjoyments.²¹

Schools, as extensions of government, are being delivered to corporations as the favor of which Dewey speaks. Accordingly, the “social service” and “personal growth in creative power” that schools *can* offer is consistently subjugated under commercial interests. This, again, is the second definition of “exploit”—“to make unethical use of for one’s own profit; specifically, to make profit from the labor of (others).” Combating the second definition is the first definition: “to make use of; to turn to account; utilize productively.” In terms of school-business partnerships, teachers and students should

demonstrate the first definition by investigating—in critically transitive ways—the impact and effect school-business partnerships have on their classroom, school, and lives outside of school.

At least three implications might follow from the foregoing claims: (1) colleges of education, foundations departments, philosophers of education, etc., should expand their analyses to include school-business partnerships and commercialism; (2) K-12 schools should avail themselves of ever-present opportunities for critique and questioning via school-business partnership programs; and (3) school-business partnerships might ebb in numbers as result of the teacher/student analyses—the ultimate point of using school-business partnerships as object lessons in the first place.

NOTES

1. David B. Guralnik, ed., *Webster's New World Dictionary* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 494.
2. Alex Molnar, "Cashing in on Kids: The Second Annual Report on Trends in Schoolhouse Commercialism," Center for the Analysis of Commercialism in Education, Document # 99-21, (September, 1999): 3. The report can be accessed at the following url:
<<http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/CACE/kidsreport/cashinginonkids.html>>
3. See John Bushey, "District 11's Coke Problem," *Harper's* (February, 1999); and Constance Hays, "Today's Lesson: Soda Rights; Consultant Helps Schools Sell Themselves to Vendors," *New York Times*, 21 May 1999, C1.
4. See Hilary Stout, "Marketing: Firms Learn that Subtle Aid to Schools Can Polish Their Images, Sell Products," *The Wall Street Journal* 25 March 1991, B1.
5. See Editorial, "Textbooks as Billboards: Commercialism Gains a Greater Hold on the Classroom," *The Fresno Bee*, 2 April 1999, F2.
6. Deron Boyles, *American Education and Corporations: The Free Market Goes to School* (New York: Falmer, 2000), 73-74.
7. Peter McLaren uses a similar phrase, "consumer capitalist culture," to make a connection between what he calls postmodern pathologies and the constitution of the body/subject. See Peter McLaren, *Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture: Oppositional Politics in a Postmodern Era* (New York: Routledge, 1995). See Boyles, 33.
8. See Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Seabury, 1973); and Ira Shor, *Empowering Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 127-128.
9. Ibid.
10. Shor, op. cit.
11. See Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988), 22 ff.
12. The concept "partnerships" relating to schools and businesses is explored in Kathleen Knight-Abowitz and Deron Boyles, "Private Interests or Public Goods?: Dewey, Rugg, and Their Contemporary Allies on Corporate Involvement in Educational Reform Initiatives," *Philosophy of Education* (in press).

13. Glen's Market flyer, "This Year, We Plan to Share," August 30, 2000.
14. Carol Trout to Eve Neumeister, letter dated October 27, 1999.
15. "River Eves Elementary School Newsletter," November 5, 1999, p. 1.
16. Constance L. Hays, "Commercialism in U.S. Schools is Examined in New Report," *The New York Times* (14 September 2000): C1, C25.
17. "Benefits of School Partnerships to the Business and School," Cobb Chamber of Commerce (Education Department), p. 3. For a detailed treatment of a state-wide business initiative (Michigan) to reform schools, see John W. Sipple, "Institutional Constraints on Business Involvement in K-12 Education Policy," *American Educational Research Journal* 36, no. 3 (Fall, 1999): 447-488.
18. See Alex Molnar, *Giving Kids the Business: The Commercialization of America's Schools* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996), 166-184.
19. See Pam Bettis, "Corporate Discourses in School: Adapting to the Prevailing Economic Climate," *Educational Foundations* (Winter, 2000): 23-49.
20. Shelly Hall to author, e-mail dated 17 August 2000.
21. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1920), 182-183.