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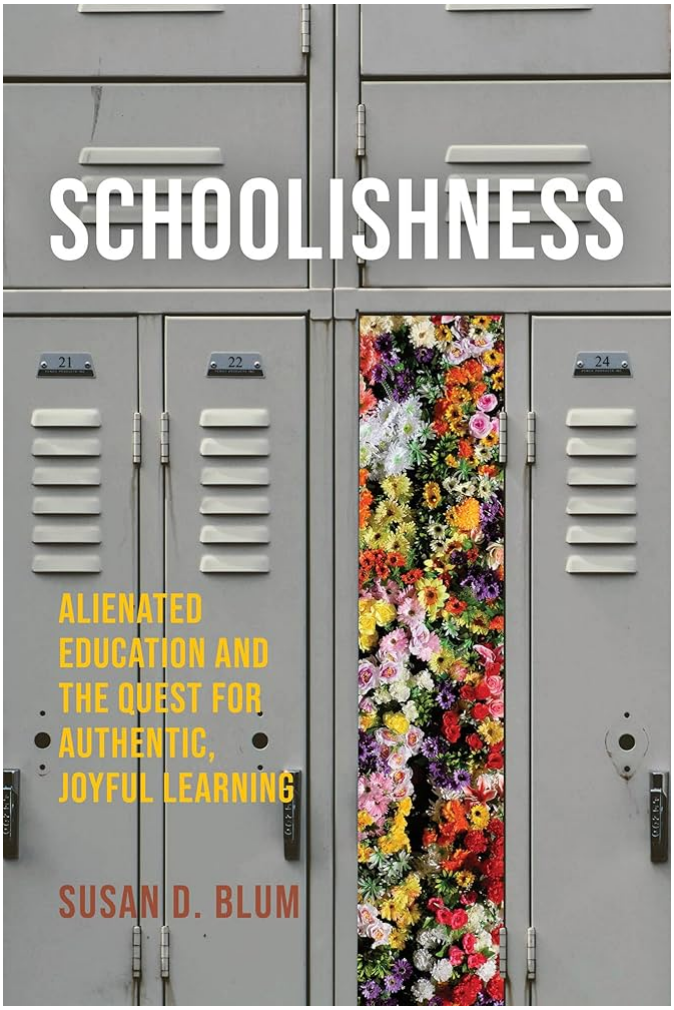
Review

Schoolishness: Alienated Education and the Quest for Authentic, Joyful Learning

by Jake Mattox



SUSAN D. BLUM. SCHOOLISHNESS: ALIENATED EDUCATION AND THE QUEST FOR AUTHENTIC, JOYFUL LEARNING. ITHACA: CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS.

Susan D. Blum. Schoolishness: Alienated Education and the Quest for Authentic, Joyful Learning. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

This book seeks to help the reader understand, and possibly see anew, how our existing practices and structures–which Susan Blum labels "schoolish" (an intended rhyme with "foolish")–work against authentic, meaningful, and joyful learning. Blum is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Notre Dame, editor of the collection *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)* (West Virginia University Press, 2020) and author of *"I Love Learning; I Hate School": An Anthropology of College* (Cornell University Press, 2016). *Ungrading* explained the many poisons of traditional grading practices while also exploring concrete classroom-based alternatives; its chapters were written by instructors teaching anywhere from middle school to college as well as familiar reformers such as Alfie Kohn and John Warner. This focus on grading is one throughline connecting Blum's work, and another includes her overall desire to show just how odd, arbitrary, and destructive the practices and "genres" specific to contemporary schooling are.

Schoolishness is structured in three parts. Part I's introduction discusses the book's central term and offers an overview and some autobiographical framing of Blum as an experienced educator and member of a field (anthropology) that seeks "to make the familiar strange." Chapter 1 narrates the emotional trauma and suffering that schools actually bring to students, and Chapter 2 uses Marx's concepts of use value and exchange value to frame its discussion of the many–often contradictory–justifications regularly put forth as the purposes of schooling in the United States. Chapters 3 through 12 make up Part II, the main body of the work, and each offers a focused, (usually) shorter discussion of one specific troubling dimension of schooling. In Part III, the most important section examines one example of authentic learning that comes directly from Blum's experience.

All along the way, the book compellingly makes clear that our current structures and practices ignore research on so many issues, from grading to the use of instructional technology to the need for experience-based learning.

The chapters of Part II are, collectively and individually, very successful in collecting and presenting research and experience that clearly state what we know about the harmful practices of our educational system. Blum uses varying blends of ethnographic description, historicization, research from multiple disciplines, and her own experience in first rethinking each dimension and then briefly sketching out alternatives. Subtitles of these chapters follow the pattern of "From [harmful practice X] to [healthier alternative Y]"; examples include Chapter 3, "Pedagogy and Pedagogizing: From Direct Instruction to Independent Learning" and Chapter 4, "Teachers, Students, Classes: From Authorities and Competitors to Communities of Varied Learners." Covering so much ground, the book might best be digested in smaller chunks, and a reader could probably pick and choose based on interest and need. But whatever you read, all the chapters seek to defamiliarize existing practices and show just how strange and troubling they are–which is very important for faculty but could also be potentially shared with students. For instance, the chapter on "schoolish" roles and relationships could be assigned to first-year college students as they reflect on their K-12 experiences and subsequent expectations for college. Or Chapter 10 on "Genres of Production," for example, which could help a writing class (and its instructor) understand and avoid the arbitrary, stressful "rules" of writing–so often taken as writing itself–that alienate, frustrate, and confuse students. And Chapter 1, "Experiencing School," could be used with students to frame why and how their K-12 experiences might have ended up as more suffering and emotional trauma than inspiration or joy.

Some chapters theorize more robustly, others historicize more deeply, and others offer more detailed and concrete ideas for what instructors might try in their own work. Across the board, though, Blum engagingly cites an eclectic (and occasionally dizzying) body of thinkers and sources. One example: Chapter 13 ("Selves: From Alienation to Authenticity, Wholeness, and Meaning") starts with an epigraph from the *Urban Dictionary* (definition of "random") and ends with a short quotation from Theodor Adorno on authenticity, along the way alluding to or citing figures and sources such as cultural theorist Lauren Berlant, linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, Deuteronomy 11.14, sociologist Arlie Hochschild (and her 1983 study on flight attendants who "were *required* to *appear genuinely*–sincerely, authentically–*happy* to see passengers"), and Aristotle and Karl Marx on use value and exchange value. Such a range usually holds together well and is brought directly back to education scholarship; Blum draws in that same chapter, for instance, on education researchers Yong Zhao and George Kuh. In fact, this is one of the main contributions of this book: readers can take advantage of Blum's wide reading and citations, especially in terms of the research behind troubling practices and ideas for concrete examples from current teachers.

Essential to the book is Chapter 14 in which Blum discusses one counter-example of authentic learning called the Bowman Creek Educational Ecosystem. This was a multiyear community-based project addressing serious water quality and vacant-lot issues in one of the most neglected neighborhoods in South Bend, Indiana. Collaboration involved Notre Dame students and professors, faculty from the regional campus of Indiana University in South Bend (where I teach), a local community college, students from at least two area high schools, city officials, churches, local residents, and at least two neighborhood organizations. From 2015 to 2021, nearly 300 students and/or student interns participated, including a team of Blum's students conducting ethnographic research that studied the learning process of other teams. Blum uses this as an extended example of authentic learning that works both within and outside of existing structures and avoids each of the ten poisonous

dimensions she outlines in previous chapters. For one, Blum notes that "activity and inquiry were *led by questions and problems* rather than a pre-ordained syllabus" (289). An example of this was the team overseeing new tree nurseries so that healthy, inexpensive young trees could be transplanted to benefit the neighborhood and improve vacant lots. But this included complex problem-solving and improvisation that had no clear textbook: "[Student interns] learned how to negotiate with neighbors. They found property records. The requested estimates from plumbers. … They developed skills and vocabulary, and both technical and bureaucratic knowledge" (276). Among other benefits, the overall project demanded independent learning; assessment was authentic; outcomes and goals were material and "real" rather than the more abstract results produced in classrooms (papers, tests); learning and working were cooperative and social. Blum's examples in this chapter are extremely compelling, even if one can't help but despair at what feels like the impossibility of implementing (and funding) such a project at most universities and in today's climate of austerity and hostility toward the notion of the public good.

This volume embodies a key contradiction facing radical educators who believe in teaching even though successes with individual students and classes occur within a larger education system that exists to serve the needs of capitalist production, which raises a series of difficult questions: What goals in working with students could ever go beyond simply creating a slightly more humane capitalism? And are smaller-scale, classroom-based "reforms" ultimately ineffective and/or easily co-opted for reactionary ends? Though any one book diagnosing the ills of our current practices and systems cannot be expected to solve that contradiction, the book often recognizes these and other questions relating to class, power, and ideology. Blum notes, for instance, our "immorally unequal society" (82) and "It may be that until we fix poverty, we can't fix schools" (321). Regarding concerns raised after studies suggest the damage the pandemic did to student performance, Blum says that "[T]he solution is not school-school-school. The solution is greater equality" (98). Some readers might simultaneously agree with these statements and then wish Blum's book devoted more attention to the material, ideological, and political factors specific to contemporary American capitalism and governance that drive such poverty and inequality, and also make more explicit how the changes she proposes in education could contribute to a dismantling of that larger system.

It could also be argued, and this seems implicit through the book, that changing the relationships and the very idea of "learning" might assist in helping students see alternatives to individualist, neoliberal ideas of social relationships, help them discover more about non-alienated ways of being in the world, and even potentially better grasp the ravages of a system based in private property and wage labor. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis's *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* (1976, reissued 2011), written in the immediate aftermath of the failure of many reform movements of the 1960s, argued that "To capture the economic impact of education, we must relate its social structure to the forms of consciousness, interpersonal behavior, and personality it fosters and reinforces in its students" (9). So many of Blum's examples take up this challenge and are precisely about consciousness and behavior. If traditional grading, for instance, is largely about the arbitrary expression of capricious power that rewards compliance (as discussed, for instance, in chapters 2 and 5), then perhaps using more truly democratic forms of engagement in schools can help pave the way to a better, freer world. Similarly, teaching students what "real" questions look like as opposed to "schoolish ones" (as discussed in Chapter 5) could help them develop both the genuine curiosity and critical thinking skills required if we are to begin to dismantle long-accepted beliefs and practices. And a thread throughout on the social nature of humans and of human learning seems crucial in counteracting individualist modes of existence.

Blum's diagnoses and approaches–with ideas for how classrooms, programs, and schools might transform themselves–are, on the whole, very persuasive and make a case for transforming from within. Her book thus joins a larger conversation about radical (or not) potential; as John Marsh suggests in *Class Dismissed: Why We Cannot Teach or Learn Our Way Out of Inequality* (Monthly Review Press, 2011), all the reforms and best practices and new teaching ideas cannot get us to our goal. Relatedly, as Bowles and Gintis argued, "movements for educational reform have faltered through refusing to call into question the basic structure of property and power in economic life" (14). It can certainly be debated just how far we need to go, whether we need to abandon our existing models, as discussed, say, by Eli Meyerhoff in *Beyond Education: Radical Studying for Another World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019) or at the 2019 conference "Whose Crisis? Whose University? Abolitionist Study in and Beyond Global Higher Education." And Blum's experiences at Notre Dame, as she knows very well, are about training the members of the future ruling class. As someone who works on the other side of South Bend at a very different kind of institution, I find her work here and in *Ungrading* to be immensely valuable, though I struggle with a few key questions: How does, and how should, education take into account the economic and social backgrounds of the students involved, the type of institution in which learning takes place? And do alternative practices in and out of the classroom, so valuable as described in this book, go far enough; how explicitly does/should the "content" of a course reveal to students, elite and non-elite, the true conditions of their existence? Raising these questions is not pointing to serious flaws here but to the position of Blum's book, even if implicitly, in larger questions facing radical educators.

Readers hoping for clear answers to those questions might be disappointed, as might those expecting a more discernible SOTL volume or collection of "best practices." As Blum herself notes, the book is essentially "a manifesto and tirade, pamphlet and prayer, autoethnography and annotated bibliography, lament and dream" (xv). *Schoolishness* truly is all of these things. But Blum's expansive reading/citing, her conversational prose, and

her spot-on diagnoses provide a compelling and incisive analysis.

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