

The Value of Experience by Larson Thune

As I sat idly at my desk, chewing on the eraser of my pencil and listening to Mr. Marsh lecture about human sexuality from the Family Life Education curriculum, I could never gain a true understanding of the subject. He spoke absently of a prostate while pointing at an obscure figure on a black and white overhead projection, declaring, "Boys, the prostate carries urine and semen in the male." As he lectured, the members of the class penciled the word "prostate" and other subsequent terms in the blanks on our worksheets.

Once he had gone over the male reproductive system, he proceeded to fill our curious brains with information about the female reproductive system. Another slide went up on the projector, titled "The Female Reproductive System." The shadow of Mr. Marsh's stout fingers traced over the diagram, stopping at various key points as he described them. "These are the labia Majora. These are the labia minora. 'Labia' is Latin for 'lips.'" His broad finger moved about an inch and a half down the slide: "this is the vaginal opening." My classmates and I scribbled the strange words furiously as he spoke, "together, these parts make up the vagina." Some boys in the class giggled; by this point in our lives, most of us in the class were aware that a girl's private region was called a vagina. Now, following Mr. Marsh's lecture we "knew" what comprised this mystical organ.

Paulo Freire, a prominent educator and author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, might disagree. Did any of us truly know what any of these organs were? Even following the series of lectures by Mr. Marsh, the female (and all but the most obvious external parts of the male) reproductive system remained little more than a colorless abstraction. In this "banking" style of learning, as it is known, Freire argues, "Words are emptied of their concreteness and become a hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity" (257). This was undeniably true. Mr. Marsh had said the labia were like lips, so did girls have teeth down there? If so, what did they brush them with? In terms of Freire's pedagogy, the manner in which this material was presented epitomizes the "banking" model of education.

The following week, the boys and girls separated again for the second half of Family Life Education. "Today's topics, boys, are the dangers of premarital sex and the consequences of teen pregnancy." As Mr. Marsh lectured, I could not keep my eyes from drifting to the window where a soccer game was being played under a cloudless blue sky. As a sixth grader, the concepts in Mr. Marsh's lecture seemed so far away, so distant, so incredibly inapplicable to me that I could not help but divert my attention.

Mr. Marsh smoothed his broad mustache, cleared his throat and continued, "Sexual intercourse happens when a man inserts his penis into a woman's vagina." Perhaps it was the very mechanical wording of the definition that threw me off. I had seen the word "insert" in several other places, such as "insert coins" on a Coke machine, or "insert disc" on a CD player, but never in this context. So then, I figured, this sex thing they talk about must be a machinelike act. Why, then, would parents scold or kids giggle at the mention of the word? Why was it the source of so many jokes I did not understand? Why was it featured so much in the media? Surely we had all used a vending machine before, so what was the big deal?

With a spine-tingling screech from the chalk on the blackboard, I snapped out of my trance. After writing our homework on the chalkboard, Mr. Marsh began highlighting all the various diseases one can acquire from engaging in sexual intercourse: "syphilis, herpes, HIV/AIDS, just to name a few. Some of these diseases can be cured with penicillin, but others never go away, and still others kill you. The bottom line is: Do not engage in premarital sex." As if sexually transmitted diseases were not enough, Mr. Marsh continued on, speaking about the risks of teenage pregnancy. "How would one of you boys like to be a father at this age? Getting a girl pregnant would mean

setting aside all your future plans to care for your child.” He paused for a brief second, pawed through his briefcase, and produced a sheet of staggering figures that confirmed the costs of raising a child.

This sex stuff seemed pretty bad. A simple mechanical insertion could lead to grotesque facial blemishes, pregnancy, or even death. If a man were to insert his quarters into a woman’s coin slot, a kicking, screaming bundle of financial ruin might be the result instead of some savory treat. Why would anyone want to engage in such an activity? Why had everyone’s parents?

I would not actively seek the answers to these questions until I was more physically matured, some three years later. Clearly, sex could not be so mechanical, nor so colorless, as the classroom made it out to be. None of the students in our crowded high school hallways would be there if that were the case. The disparity between what appeared to be true and what I had learned in school through the years was too great. It was this observation and my changing hormones that drove me to seek answers myself.

“For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human,” asserts Freire (257). This proved stunningly true when I had my first sexual education—*outside* the classroom. Sex was not the static act it was made out to be all these years. It was a close, intimate, interactive activity. It was a steamy, sweaty, sensual act. It was not just a mechanical insertion; it was tickling, touching, tasting; it was nibbling; it was panting; it was the closeness of exposed flesh; it was massaging, caressing; it was ecstasy.

Freire was right: “the banking approach masks the effort to turn women and men into automatons—the very negation of their ontological vocation to be more fully human” (259). Speaking about and diagramming sex with overhead slides dehumanizes the act and the people involved. Sexual intercourse is performed by all mammals, and represents an essential part of nature. The public school system’s attempt to inhibit students from fully understanding this act serves to distort this most sacred existential role. According to Freire’s logic, I “turn[ed] against [my] domestication and the attempt to domesticate reality” (259). The Family Life Education course served to do just that—“domesticate” the students by “domesticating reality.” The worksheets, the G-rated illustrations, the overhead projections all “domesticated” the truly wild and natural act of sex and thereby attempted to neuter my fellow students and me like household pets.

After realizing that school does not always hold my true education as its chief goal, I was enlightened. Now I could allow myself to listen to my instructor, assess his or her comments, and decide for myself if the “facts” I was learning were indeed the truth, or merely further attempts of the educational system to condition me. I could ask my own questions, seek my own answers, and conduct my own research. Exploration and discovery became the tools with which I could now construct my universe. My ability to question, infer, and investigate transcended the textbooks, teachers, and overhead projections of the classroom. At last I had freed myself from the fetters of the educational system by learning that true understanding can only be achieved through experience.

Works Cited

Freire, Paulo. “The ‘Banking’ Concept of Education. *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Readers*. 7th ed. Ed. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky. New York: Bedford, 2005. 255-270.