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The Sociology of Classroom Teaching: A Microfunctional Analysis

The central point of this paper is that the classroom uses information exchange as a vehicle for the structuring of behavior. This contrasts to the view that children in class must "behave" themselves in order that they may learn something. When viewed from an anthropological perspective, the disinterested observer quickly notes that *content* of interaction is quite secondary to the *structure* of interaction from classroom to classroom. The content of subject matter is trivial when compared to the other functional imperatives. This is clearly seen when one compares course content across classes. The content of a history course varies dramatically as between "history" classes within even the same school system — even when taught consecutively by the *same* instructor.

The secondary importance of content is even more clear as between cultures. Taking a history class which deals with English history, it is easy to see that "objective" facts are most dissimilar from culture to culture. The War of 1812 might well have been five quite different wars were one to focus on facts and events reported in five different history classes in, say, France, England, U.S.A., Russia, and Germany. It is irrelevant to ask which version is correct. It simply does not make any difference since content does not make any difference.

Were content of courses crucial to some critical end, then, at least in the same society, every school system would have the same curriculum. This is manifestly not the case.

Mathematics provides another case in point. For advanced societies, a functioning mathematician requires more skills than taught in high schools and universities. At the same time those who have "taken mathematics" in high schools are anything but proficient. I recently asked a class of teachers to multiply 15,873 by 968. I received seven different answers from the first seven students. On the eighth try I found an answer similar to another answer. For the most part, it simply does not matter whether one knows how to "do" algebra, calcu-

lus, Boolian algebra or Matrix algebra. It is even true that one need not know how to add, subtract, divide, or multiply; machines do these things ever so much more quickly and accurately in any endeavor one might call to mind where mathematics does make a difference. Language courses provide a further example. Perhaps the worst way to teach a language is by means of drill on verb conjugations and vocabulary.

But there must be some context in which algebra, language drill, chemistry, and history teaching make sense. It is the primary purpose of this paper to develop the functional context in which classroom behavior is "rational" in the Weberian sense of "rationality." It is the central thesis of the paper that what goes on in a classroom might better be understood from the perspective of systems theory rather than from the point of view of pedagogical theory. To the student, to the teacher, to the administrator, the classroom is more important as it functions to socialize than as it functions to transmit a body of knowledge.

To say that the content of mathematics is irrelevant to the education of most students is not to say that nothing of value is learned in a math class. Quite the contrary. But what is learned that is of value is not the mathematics but rather the norms which create a math class *qua* a social system.

While most students do not "need" geometry or algebra in their everyday life, most certainly do need to know how to behave in a way such that a social system emerges. Let us reinterpret behavior in a classroom from this point of view. This would show how the teaching which takes place in an "educational" setting provides the very best socialization training for maximizing the probabilities that children may become, after six to ten years, so skilled in the construction and continuation of a social system that by the time they leave the school system they function adequately in any social system as second nature. The manifest function of specific unit acts in a classroom is to transfer information and understanding. The latent function of the unit acts is to produce a person with the minimal capacities with which to proceed smoothly through the phases of assembling and disassembling a social system.

CONSTRUCTING A SOCIAL SYSTEM

Definition of the Situation

One of the prime requisites of any social system is that everyone share the same definition of the situation. This requires that all alternate, competing definitions of the situation be put aside in order that the one, legitimate, definition obtain. In most school systems, the program of activities is constantly changed, thus providing ample experience in changing definitions of the situation quickly and smoothly — as is necessary for adequate functioning in a complex society. It is

this quick and smooth transition of any given definition of the situation which is crucial and not any particular definition *per se.*

Specifically, it does not matter whether the children go from math to science to reading to spelling, *or* from reading to history to shop to recess. What is important is that they quickly and readily change definitions of situations when and only when required to do so — without question, without insight, without backtalk.

Observe the following transition from one definition of the situation to another, different, definition of the situation:

> In this class the tables and chairs are arranged into three distinct groups, and the children are assigned to one of the groups according to their reading level. The children are engaged in several different kinds of activity. Some pupils are drawing while others are doing workbook exercises, copying work from the blackboard, or reading silently to themselves.
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> Mrs. Schwartz begins to get the children ready to go down to see the science television program. She tells those children who feel that they will be chilly to go and get their sweaters. A general cleaning-up period is followed by the lining up of the children at the door. The children line up by sex, with the girls in one line and the boys in another. The two lines are at right angles to each other and as the children leave the room, they go out in pairs. A boy escorts a girl until the number of boys runs out and two girls have to walk with each other.
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> The children go down the hall quietly, although there is some conversation among them. They take great interest in looking inside the glass windows on the closed doors of the other classes that are in session. On one of the classroom doors there is a photograph of the children in the room and one of the children stops to look at the pictures and point out his brother and sister to one of his friends.
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> The children stay in line, but they do quite a bit of shoving of each other. This is not a hard kind of shoving, but it involves a good deal of bodily contact with one another. Occasionally children give one another a hard shove. For example, a child pushes another child out of his way. The children carry on a friendly banter with each other, and there is a great deal of informal communication between the two sexes.
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> They go down to the television room in the basement. It is a dark room, quite large and cool, but not cold. A television set is located by one of the walls. It is about eight or nine feet off the floor and quite high for children of this age. The reception is not very good this morning, and it is sometimes difficult to understand the woman who is presenting the program, which is entitled "Science House." On their way downstairs, two or three of the children spoke about the series of television programs with enthusiasm. This particular program is taught by a woman who talks about music boxes and demonstrates what they are like on the inside. One other first grade class is present in the television room and is watching the program.[1]

It is important to note that the content of the science class was trivial. This excerpt was chosen especially to forestall any rationalizing about the "value" of science to the well-rounded child. The reception of the program, the content of the program, and the use of the science pro-

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[1]This excerpt and all but one other are taken from G. Alexander Moore, Jr., *Realities of the Urban Classroom, Obervations in Elementary Schools,* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967).

gram by the teacher afterwards make it amply apparent that the content did not matter in the least. Even if the reception had been clear and a discussion had followed, the point would remain since one could hardly hold that its content is vital to the children. It may even be asserted that the content has been completely forgotten by all of those present, including Mrs. Schwartz.

But notice, Mrs. Schwartz takes them away from effective engrossment in one activity compatible with one definition of the situation: "Some pupils are drawing while others . . ." She has an effective, fairly important social system going and stops it, moves the children through a busy hall to an uncomfortable room with over-sized desks in order that they may settle to a trivial, *but different,* definition of the situation, i.e., that of a science class as opposed to that of a reading class.

The experienced teacher will remember the loud groans of her students as she enforces the switch of definitions on them on those many occasions when they are engaged in relevant, enjoyable learning experiences. The socialization imperatives clearly outweigh the educational imperatives. By the time these people get to university classes, they are so effectively socialized that they will embrace any legitimized definition of the situation imposed upon them. I have experimented and it is true. I spent one class period reading to my class from a telephone book. In terms of cognitive dissonance theory, the students attempted to give this activity a gloss of meaning, when actually it was meaningless. This further emphasizes the point that, given the proper structural supports for legitimizing a definition of the situation, *any* content will be accepted as legitimate.

The first imperative, then, for any given social system is a shared definition of a situation for "well-organized" school systems. The major elements in the definition process are usually built into the architecture such that anyone could see at a glance what the definition is. But sometimes the definition is problematic, as when the definition changes but the furnishings remain the same:

> . . . They return to the class and distribute milk cartons, one to each child. During the snack the children are given permission to talk: "Now you may have a quiet conversation. Remember, if I can hear you it is not quiet." This is the only time during the day the children are free to pursue their own inclinations. While they do so, the teacher every now and then mentions, "I can hear you." The noise then drops.

As one can see, the kids understand that it is *not* a classroom definition of the situation, but the teacher unilaterally attempts to impose such an illegitimate definition upon them and meets with indifferent success.

In comparison with a classroom situation, a religious definition of the situation follows essentially the same pattern. In the physical structuring there are various defining symbols; i.e., the altar, cross, signs, stained glass windows, and candles. In addition, there is an area of

legitimacy — the altar — from which the minister directs the solidation of the congregation by various mechanisms: calling for them to bow their heads and pray or to stand and sing. Given these supports for establishing the legitimacy of the minister's leadership and the mechanisms he employs such that a religious definition of the situation will emerge, it is clear that the mechanisms for defining the situation in church and in the classroom are so similar that once one has been adequately socialized to recognize and accept these cues, it becomes easy for him to enter into this new social system without giving it any thought.

Recognition

A major system problem involving the construction of social systems out of people requires the implementation of the rule of "face rights."[2] It is necessary to separate those who are legitimate members of a system from those who are not. The classroom setting is a place wherein these distinctions are vigorously made, often at the expense of education. For example, the professor is given a list of those who have face rights in his classes and is forbidden to permit those without face rights from learning all the good things taught. In the first excerpt, the kids peering through the glass windows of the closed doors of "other" classes have learned to view themselves as "non-persons" and to avoid seeking face rights in systems where they are so defined.

Another case in point: should one hear of an interesting lecture in another classroom, one feels reluctant to attend. Should one walk into a lecture inadvertently, one is expected to apologize and back out. The opportunity to learn is quite secondary. Should one get caught in a lecture without face rights, one feels comfortable only after apologizing.

This same point can be made negatively. It does not really matter how dull, flat, and profitless is a classroom; one must attend if one is defined as a legitimate member of the system. Thus are social systems constructed.

Solidation

After members of a social system recognize and accept the definition of the situation imposed by the school routine, it is necessary that they cease to be private individuals and begin to be co-members in a social system. They must act as though the first person singular did not exist behaviorally and behave as though the first person plural operates actually. This means they must all express behavior relevant to the role-segments they occupy and take each other into continuous and reciprocating account.

This social ability is carefully nourished by the attending teacher. The näive teacher thinks all she has to do is to define the situation

[2]This material and much elsewhere comes from Erving Goffman's writings. For a discussion of face engagements, see Goffman's *Behavior in Public Places*, (Glencoe, Ill,: Free Press, 1963).

and to start teaching. First comes solidation and if it is not achieved the system does not emerge.

> It is 9:30 and Mrs. Auslander is telling the children to hold their hands up in order that she may inspect them to see if they are clean. Completing this, she tells the children to sing their morning song. "This is the way we wash our hands," the children start singing, and make appropriate motions as they continue through the various verses. . . .
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> The song is over and the teacher, attempting to drill them on the days of the week, asks them, "What day is today? What day was yesterday? What day will tomorrow be?" As the children call out the names of the various days, she stops to correct them: "Give your answers in sentences!"
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> Meanwhile several children are noisily running around the room hitting one another. Others sit in a stupor, apparently quite unaware of their surroundings. In the space of the first ten minutes, the teacher has used physical force and actually hurts the children in an attempt to control them. Yet she has not achieved control of the class, nor does she at any time during the morning. She frequently addresses her noisy, restless class, saying, "When I have everyone's attention and your hands are folded, then I will listen to what you're trying to say." Since this never happens, she never really listens to any of the children during the morning, yet many of them do seem to want to say something to her.

Involvement

There is a norm across all social systems that each member must express behaviorally, linguistically and affectively that one is committed to the social occasion at hand.[3] To treat things lightly, to invest only a minimum of energy in a game-related event is to express distance from the system at hand.

One must learn to be ready to offer one's energy, one's ability, one's activity to the occasion specified by the situation defined. One may not pursue private interests; one may not cheat; one may not be disinterested.

> Although Miss Rosencranz is busily working with the one group of children on reading and vocabulary, her attention is routinely given to the children who are doing the written exercise that she has assigned. . . . To another child over there she says, "Where are the questions? Where are you looking? Will you find it out the window? Turn around and get to work."

In the excerpt above, one may see that a central task of Miss Rosencranz involves drawing the children into the main involvement and chiding them when they reveal only *pro forma* commitment to the stated main occasion.

A "wild" class is not a collection of individuals doing incomprehensible things, but rather a collection of individuals engrossed in each other in ways other than that specified by the definition of the situation. The people below are involved, but not in a single, focussed, shared, legitimate series of events:

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[3]See Goffman's discussion on Involvement in *Behavior in Public Places, op. cit,* Chapter 3.

The observer sees the teacher has a lesson on the board but notes that there is a great deal of activity among the children. One boy is crawling on the floor looking for a nickel. Allen, the Negro youngster with crossed eyes, is sitting in the front of the room, but maintaining constant activity from his seat. Many of the children are hitting one another; a child will get up from his seat, go over to another child for no apparent reason and slap him in the face, or perhaps push him or strike his body before rushing back to his seat. These are all initial impressions made after the first few minutes in the classroom.

One boy, Angel, runs over to Allen, throws him on the floor, and jumps up on his back with both feet. Allen quite naturally screams and yells. The teacher screams too: "Get away from there!" She continues to scream and we learn the names of the two brawlers.

Many children are calling out and shouting to one another across the room. As the observer looks around the room, she sees many children hitting each other on the head with pencils.

In this excerpt, most of the behavior is not "game-related." The behavior must be game-related or it will be defined as misbehavior. This is true irrespective of how vital the activity is to individuals as individuals, or even how important it is as an educational experience. Many children have been beaten, high brow and low brow, for reading literature when they should have been reading history, or for "doing" math when they were scheduled to do "sit-ups." But this point is best illustrated with the superior child. He must appear to be involved long after it is necessary for purely learning purposes. This is the context in which "busy work" is meaningful. Although it gives no additional information, it functions as a structural support to keep the superior child involved in the main, legitimate, activity after he has absorbed the content of the information being given.

After the social studies lesson (which only took a few minutes) the teacher walks to the blackboard and begins to work on multiplication and division using the number 10. The problems include $20 \div 10 = 2$; $2 \times 10 = 20$. She begins to explain to the children about dropping and adding the zero depending upon whether you are doing multiplication or division. She tells one child, "It's no wonder you do not know your arithmetic. What's so interesting over there? I saw you. Don't tell me you were not doing anything." The child quietly tries to answer her but finally accepts her reprimands without protest.

"You are not paying attention," she shouts at Billy.

He replies: "I am paying attention."

"All right, Billy," she says, "do the next one."

Billy quickly answers the problem. "You do not know how lucky you are you got it right," the teacher says. She then addresses another boy. "Are you quite finished, bigmouth? When I want you to answer, I'll call on you. You know she has trouble with arithmetic. I'm trying to help her." (She is referring to a girl that she has just called on to do one of the problems. She thinks that this boy has been trying to whisper the answer to the girl.)

Whatever the social system, one is obliged to maintain, through body and verbal idiom, the appearance of involvement — nay, engrossment — in the occasioned main activity.

Rules of Irrelevance

In order to maintain involvement in a social system, many events in the life-space of a child must be defined as irrelevant.[4] In particular, the child must learn to define physiological and psychological imperatives as quite irrelevant to the structure of action. The greatest delict in class from the point of view of the "teacher" is for the student to break wind. The student must contain physiological variables of the sort in order to communicate that he is in, and of, the social system. In most societies, not to do so reflects too much distance from the system and not enough involvement.

The "good" teacher responds to these delicts by appropriate degrees of shock and disgust. This may be seen in the following:

> . . . "Copy the questions down in your notebooks so that you will be able to write out the answers at home," instructs the teacher. "Study for your spelling test which you will have tomorrow. And don't forget to wear your white shirt tomorrow."
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> One boy raises his hand and says, "I want a pass to go to the bathroom." She says, "You cannot have a pass. You certainly *cannot* have a pass at twenty minutes after one o'clock."

A social system cannot be maintained unless the members come to define only system-related imperatives as binding. Other than that no system emerges and it is improper to speak of social phenomena. One easily and readily learns to damp out such physiological variables as fatigue, gastric distress, headache, and so on. It is more of a problem to socialize children to define psychological urges, needs, wants, cares, etc., as irrelevant than to teach them "History."

A great deal of effort on the part of teachers is allocated to creating such needs, interests, urges, and then to switch such that other psychological states are appropriate. When this occurs, an excellent opportunity exists for the teacher to establish the rules of irrelevance. Mr. Bianchi in the following excerpt is particularly skilled at informing students that their personal wishes are irrelevant, irrespective of how well-intentioned the students might be:

> The teacher has still not finished his vocabulary drill, when his class is interrupted by two children who enter with a cardboard box containing baby chickens. They ask to show the baby chickens to the class but Mr. Bianchi will have none of it.
>
> "What's this? To show the class? Okay. Not now. Later on, but not now."

And again:

> Mr. Bianchi now asks questions about the board work, calling out each child's name for an answer. The remaining pupils are supposed to be quiet and not shout answers. One child jumps up and answers out of turn, but

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[4]Goffman has an extensive discussion on the rules of irrelevance in *Encounters*: Two studies in the Sociology of Interaction (Indianapolis, Indiana: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961).

the teacher shouts, "I said Maria." Frowning and waving his finger, the teacher says to another boy, "Daniel, be careful!"

The lesson about irrelevant personal proclivities is made often in quite straightforward language:

Miss Rosencranz pastes some of the bird and flower pictures on the window. One of the girls begins to giggle. The teacher comments, "You have the giggles. Do you have gum in addition to the giggles?"

The girl answers, "Yes."

The teacher tells the girl, "Go over and throw the gum into the waste-paper basket. It's a good thing a visitor is here. I don't want to embarrass you in front of her or I would ask you to put the gum on your nose."

The point here is that the structure of meaning which underwrites social systems is so tenuous that stimuli foreign to that meaning *must* be defined as irrelevant. By the time kids get to college, this ability to treat imperatives from other systems, social and physiological, as irrelevant is close to complete.

Shielding

If one cannot maintain commitment to the structure of meaning in a social system, one is taught to shield. To shield is to protect the social system.[5] Across the board, from the classroom to the top administration, shielding is an integral part of the system imperatives. Truth, beauty, wisdom: all are secondary to the norm of shielding.

Cathy, a first-grader, has a severe asthmatic condition, which causes her to cough and wheeze continually. Because of her attacks she is incapable of muffling, or shielding, this disruptive behavior. Mrs. Wilson removes her from the classroom group by placing her chair in a corner in the front of the room, and tells her she can rejoin the class when "you get over your cold" — which, of course, she never does. Because the child cannot shield these "non-game related acts" she is removed from the social system.

What is true of teachers is true of students. Teachers and students are excused from great delicts providing these delicts are shielded. If they are not shielded, then the culpable member is attacked, sometimes brutally, by members of the system. If non-game behavior is shielded, no-one objects to its "presence." Shielding is a necessary norm in that few persons are able to stay up-tight to the situational map all the time. Shielding private activities permits the formal definition of the situation to survive even under the most trying conditions.

The Rule-directed Rule

The most general rule enforced in the classroom which overrides all the others is that behavior shall be rule-directed. This rule, if successfully implanted, would enable every student to function adequately in 95 percent of all social systems in which he might find himself. This is true even when the person might be in a highly "professionalized" system. As long as he does not break the rules, he survives. If persons have only

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[5]*Behavior in Public Places*, p. 38 *et passim*.

this one capacity, almost anybody could compose a social system out of people.

The concrete embodiment of this overriding rule may be found in even the most superficial of analyses of the classroom:

> Five students are at the back of the room by the library shelf, violating a rule, for she reminds them that only three are supposed to be there at one time. The two boys sit down and wait for the girls to select their books. Mrs. Schiller circulates, helping children with words and telling them to be quiet.

This excerpt points up the preoccupation with rules found in the school system.

Other excerpts from the interaction between students and teachers illuminate the arbitrary manner in which teachers come to view their orders as rules:

"Stand. Get into a line in front of the room."

"Begin working on these problems."

"Get to work."

"Take your seat."

Where information exchange or knowledge acquisition is overriding, the rule would vary with the conditions as is the case in some professional schools. But information exchange is not at issue — following rules is at issue.

> Glancing at the clock, Miss Miller recommends that the meeting adjourn and cues the chairman to ask that a motion be made. They follow parliamentary procedure, and disperse with the exception of the members of the executive committee, who are asked by Miss Miller to remain. This intimate group is composed of the president, the vice president (a Hispano boy), and the secretary. Miss Miller inquires, "How did the meeting go?" They do not know what she means so she attempts a further explanation which elicits responses. Yes, all three executive members have complaints: Three class representatives were noisy and talkative. Miss Miller agrees with their judgment (perhaps this might have been what was on her mind). "What can we do about them?"

> First they want Miss Miller to stay in the room during the student council meetings, for they feel this way the three youngsters will behave. "No," replies Miss Miller, "*you* must control the situation yourselves."

This excerpt embodies the epitome of classroom teaching; that of encouraging the students to construct and enforce rules on themselves. Much student government activity at the high school and college level is incomprehensible, taking the manifest microfunction by itself as a means to understand behavior.

The Continuation Norm

In order to prepare children to be able to participate in social systems, it is necessary that they come to view it as natural that they continue

locked in the system until the system is legitimately terminated by the official schedule.

Much which would otherwise be pettiness on the part of the teacher makes sense when viewed as a socialization rather than as an educational experience:

> Mrs. Caplan then asks the children to pick up reading about Alaska where she had left off.
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> A short time later she instructs the children to close their books. "Since we have a few minutes left," she says, "let's sing." The first song is "Dites-Moi Pourquoi," sung in French just as in *South Pacific.*
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> "Sit up," she tells them. The second song is "Whistle a Happy Tune." They are finishing it when the bell rings. The teacher tells the girls to line up, then has the boys do the same. The class leaves, bound for the cafeteria.

From the material above, it may be seen readily that even though the educational material runs out, the sociology of it all continues to be binding *until* the bell rings. This is not true in graduate education where, when there is no more to be said, the social system is dismantled. This is a rough way in which the analyst may determine where the school program places priorities.

Disengagement

The final process imperative is that the system be officially terminated and members duly disengage.

"Wait until you're excused."

"Well, there's the bell."

"I'm sorry, but I can't talk to you now."

These are the semantic equivalents for telling people that they are no longer held by the system and may go their own way — nay, more, that they have face rights no longer and that interaction is now an unnecessary burden.

There are often personal side-effects of this emphasis on socialization. Upon entering school for the first time, many children are interested and enthusiastic, obviously "ready" for learning. Almost immediately they find that "learning" consists, not in looking at rocks and trees, but in being quiet, speaking in turn and staying in their seats. Some teachers, in socializing the children, must occasionally resort to measures as extreme as chastising them in front of their classmates or encouraging the other children to ridicule them when they deviate from accepted behavior patterns. The result often is, in the teachers' eyes, a more well-adjusted, normal child. From another perspective it is a bland, uncommunicative and disinterested child who responds with an automatic "fine" to every query about school.

Summary

Definition of the situation, recognition, solidation, involvement, rules of irrelevance, shielding, rule-directed rule, continuation, and disengagement are social system imperatives.

Much of the behavioral events in a classroom are more understandable when viewed in light of their relevance to social system imperatives than when viewed as germane to enlightenment, erudition, and self-fulfillment — catch-words frequently found in *post hoc* rationalizations of *curricula operendi.*