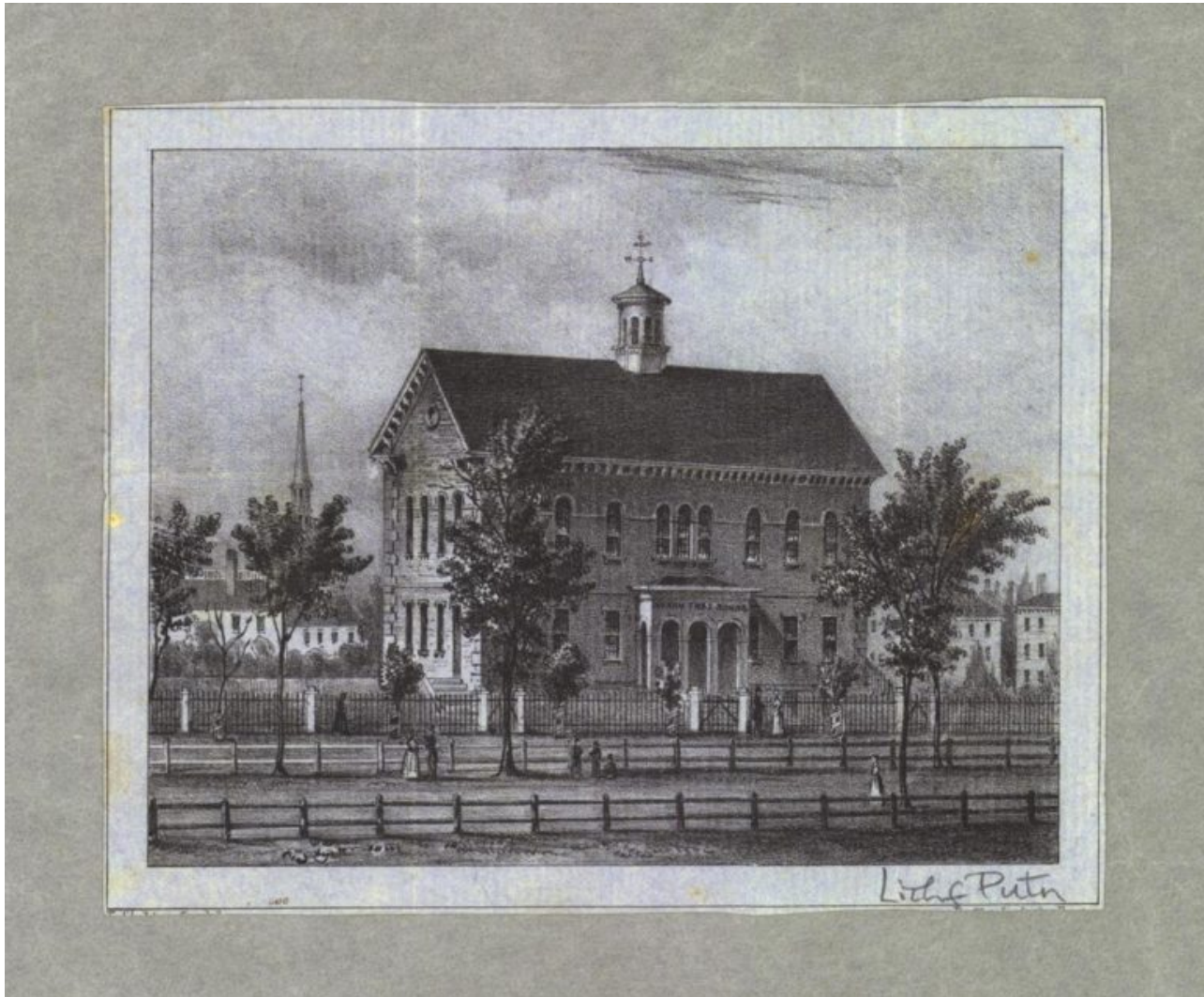


Blogging, with Pickles: Adventures (and misadventures) in the quest to capture the flavor of everyday school life



When, not for the first time, the ever-encouraging director of technology at my school suggested that I jump on the blogging bandwagon earlier this year, I was finally inclined to hear his message and take his advice. There were a few reasons. The first, of course, was simple curiosity. Like a lot of people, I've gradually become aware of what might be termed the blogging craze of the early twenty-first century, a cultural practice at the center of what we've come to call "Web 2.0." I first learned of blogging in early 2001, when doing research for an updated edition of my book on the history of popular culture. It wasn't until years later, however, that I became a regular reader of blogs, mostly those of major news outlets. The IT director at my school turned me from a reader to a writer by telling me about the existence of a series of idiot-proof software programs that allow even a technophobe like me to have his own blog.

Because he happened to be most familiar with Blogger, a free software package hosted by Google, I took that route.

That's the way I went but not quite *why* I went. Actually, the forces leading me in this direction were at least as much cultural as they were technological. Most of the professional ambition of my life has focused on books, and at the start of 2009 I'd just published my tenth. But I had serious doubts that I would ever produce another one. This was partly a matter of fatigue. At the same time, I'd long been a student of the publishing industry, which is, of course, in terrible shape (as it was in 1985, when I got my first job out of college working for Simon & Schuster; lamenting the state of publishing is the one constant of the business). The challenge now is not simply the usual one of the difficulty even established authors have getting books published—and as a mid-list author at best, my track record hurts more than helps—but that the Web is transforming both the form and pace of information distribution.



It doesn't really matter what we teachers say: going to the library—even placing an order with Amazon.com—is simply not the way most of the young people I work with get their information anymore. Yes, of course, I take them to the library, have the librarians walk them through the stacks (along with the databases), and demand that they have print sources in the bibliographies of their research essays. But let's face it: in real life, if it's not online, it effectively doesn't exist. The book business hasn't gone the way of the record business, yet, but it's only a matter of time. As I was writing this article, I bought my first e-book to be read on my iPod. I very much doubt it will be my last.

But while it's one thing to have new means of communication and to believe they're important, it's another to have anything useful to say. We all know the blogosphere is littered with the detritus of failed experiments, dated information, and mindless drivel. Moreover, the mere existence of quality material doesn't mean anyone will find it, much less read it. I have a few topics on which I consider myself a bona fide expert (e.g., the music of Bruce Springsteen). I can also knock out a halfway decent book review pretty quickly. But so what? Sure, I could post pieces along these lines (and have gone on to do so), along with millions of others. But was there anything I could talk about usefully in an ongoing way?

I decided the answer was yes: I could write about classroom teaching. From what I could tell, the professional discourse of pedagogy takes three forms. The

first is empirical research that seeks to ascertain concrete answers to notoriously elusive questions about things like teacher quality, the impact of variables like school or class size, and the relationship between curricular and extracurricular dimensions of a child's educational experience. The second is more theoretical work, sometimes informed by empirical research, about the nature of learning. And the third is what I'll call "Try This" literature, educational recipes that take the form of specific techniques or content you simply pop into the classroom, season to taste, and serve. (We've published some work of this kind in *Common-place*.) Sprawling across a vast K-12 domain, dogged by questions of professional prestige that have plagued primary and secondary school teachers since the nineteenth century, this discourse is at best a sprawling bazaar in which you can occasionally find treasured information. At worst, it's an impenetrable jungle.

I decided I wanted to try a different approach. Rather than describe educational issues, problems, or practices in an abstract way, I would depict real-life situations that were both concrete and resonant at the same time. Rather than *tell*, I would *show*. How can you have a real conversation about the cost of rail travel in the industrial revolution? What are some techniques for dealing with passive students? Over-assertive parents? The important point here is that I would not necessarily be showcasing best practices in a Try This kind of way. Instead, the goal would be to be set up truly arguable scenarios that would further discussion and reflection rather than deliver information. Above all, I would try to capture the life of teaching in motion, the way teachers constantly make choices in real time, like actors or musicians practicing a craft. Rather than continue the century-long chase of educators seeking to derive their legitimacy by couching discussions of their work in terms of social science, I would locate the discourse of education where it belongs: in the realm of art.



In adopting this method, I would be emulating the work of my father-in-law, Ted Sizer, an education reformer who in *Horace's Compromise* (1984) and other books, periodically used the device of a composite teacher (later principal) named Horace Smith to illustrate the barriers to education reform. Ted, a former headmaster at Phillips Academy Andover and later a professor of education at Brown, had an eagle-eye view of the educational horizon formed over decades of close observation at hundreds of schools, though one in which the classroom teacher was always pivotally important. As a classroom teacher myself, I wanted to take his work to its logical conclusion: to ground conversations about education in the people who actually do the work of educating—which, to a great

extent, of course, includes the students.

You see where this is going and where I would be likely to have problems. I dubbed my project "The Felix Chronicles," in honor of Felix Adler, the Progressive-era founder of my school. My posts, typically about a thousand words, were set in recognizable locations and narrated in the first person: I was unmistakably me. Naturally, I merged, altered, and invented identities for my students and colleagues, whose privacy I took seriously. The fact that the focus of my posts was a U.S. history survey of which I had taught multiple sections going back many years made it easy for me to scramble people and topics. I was interested in the most ordinary of interactions and situations in everyday life, not personal secrets or institutional controversies. But I knew what I was doing was risky, and I knew that sooner or later I would make a mistake of one kind or another.

It took about two weeks. The blog post in question, called "Pickles," described an interdepartmental meeting to discuss a joint English-History curriculum. There has been longstanding friction between the departments at my school (not unique, I've learned) stemming from a belief that such efforts seem to turn literature into a handmaiden of history, shoe-horning it, for example, into a chronological sequence that English teachers don't particularly like. To literally dramatize the point, I invented dialogue in which an irritated English teacher notes the absence of Emerson from a proposed curriculum I'd drafted. When I note that the Sage of Concord is there, pointing to a line in the draft that specifies "Emerson and/or Thoreau," this teacher replies irritably, "You've just illustrated my point. Don't you see? It's like pickles or coleslaw. One or the other. A side dish. And the burger is History." Other English teachers rally to this argument, and I realize they're right. That was the point of the piece.

However, the sympathetic but concerned chair of my department reported to me, that's not what my readers were taking away from it. Instead, the focus was on the way my pickles character corresponded to colleague X.

"But it's not X," I objected.

"Well that's who the students understand it to be." My chair went on to note that the figure in question had a similar hairstyle and had generated impatience within the English department, two traits well known to students and faculty at the school. I had to concede the point; indeed, I had foreseen the possibility at the time I wrote the piece, which is why I went out of my way to give this character a very different personality than that of X, who in fact is quite a genial person with a different position on the issue in question than that of the character I described. But I could see now that I'd been careless. My intent was to raise pedagogical questions. Instead, I'd unwittingly written a gossip column.

Alerted to this reality, I went back and overhauled the post, determinedly

altering the character in question even more. I considered going to X and offering an apology. But it seemed odd to apologize for a matter that was more about what others thought than what I said, and I feared it might only inflame the situation further. Whether or not X was aware of the situation—this is the kind of person who might well have laughed it off—there was no sign of distress, and indeed we remained as friendly as ever, notwithstanding the awkwardness I felt and the debit that remains on my moral ledger. A few days after our “pickles” conversation, the chair approached me again, noting that the buzz hadn’t gone away. So I deleted the post entirely, which appeared to put out that particular brushfire. Still, I decided that if the matter resurfaced or another like it came up, I would pull the plug on the project as a whole.

The experiment lasted another four months, effectively making it a semester long. In that time, I think I got better at framing issues and practicing discretion, and I got some positive feedback inside and outside the school along the way. But I began to see that the mere knowledge I was blogging could conceivably have an impact on what a student might or might not say in the classroom (one student wrote to tell me of reading the blog and *hoping* to surface on it). Ironically, the final shot across my bow was a function of an attempt to parry such issues. I took a snippet of classroom exchange and moved it to a different course in a different grade. Nevertheless, I heard third hand that the students in the latter class were certain I was writing about them, when no part of the conversation could accurately be attributed to them. Still, the facts were beside the point. I did not believe I had done anyone serious harm. But I knew that sooner or later I really could and that my primary obligation was to my institution and the people who comprise it, not my profession (or my aspirations). I wrapped the project up with a few more pieces, mostly personal reflection, and brought it to a conclusion.

Yet I haven’t been willing to give up on it entirely. This summer, I embarked on a new series. My protagonist is a wholly imaginary character, a wise Latina woman named Maria Bradstreet. Maria is a forty-nine-year-old recent divorcee who left her job in New Hampshire to take a position at the fictive Hudson High School, located somewhere in metropolitan New York. So far, Maria has dealt with situations like her ambivalence about getting help with her laptop from a sixteen-year-old, deciding how much homework to assign for a new elective she designed, and grappling with a crying student that she encounters in the girls’ bathroom. Fiction gives me a legal firewall, but I will continue to have to navigate ethical issues in what I still consider, for the moment anyway, an intellectually legitimate enterprise.

Writing this piece has been a somewhat sobering experience because it has led me to reflect on a series of aspects of my project, some of which I could anticipate before I started and some of which I have only started to apprehend. I think we all know that technology, specifically that cluster of innovations we designate with the shorthand “Internet 2.0,” is transforming our social lives and the boundary between public and private, even as the implications

remain far from clear. But until I was actually participating myself, I don't think I understood the extent to which activities like blogging and social networks like Facebook (which I use to promote the blog to friends and former students) have invisibly reached into the traditionally entrenched space of the classroom, a reach that administrators, politicians, and reformers can only envy. These new developments haven't necessarily subverted traditional teaching—or replaced old-fashioned forms of gossip that certainly require no Wi-Fi access—but we ignore them, or uncritically embrace them, at our peril.

Technology is also partially a factor in what I see as a broader epistemological shift in intellectual life, one anticipated by postmodern theory and now literally being played out on iPhone and other screens, in which the constructed nature of reality trumps the positivist foundations of intellectual inquiry long central to the educational enterprise. If you would have told me a year ago that my principal pursuit of professional development would take the form of writing fiction, I would have found the idea laughable. And, of course, I'm positively old-fashioned in crafting what are in effect didactic short stories. Parents, administrators, and government officials may obsess about test scores, but the real frontier of learning these days is the documentary films, Websites, and games that good students are as apt to design as to watch or play. Anyone who thinks otherwise will be left behind.

I think my experience also shows the excitement, possibilities, and limits of the new world in which the barriers to publication are effectively removed. Having lived most of my professional life trying to win the approval of gatekeepers for periodicals and publishing houses, I now have an exhilarating freedom to broadcast whatever I want whenever I want. Of course, getting people to pay attention (forget about getting paid) is another matter. Moreover, an urge for an audience brings with it a great potential to lead one astray. And the chase for readers may also obscure the importance of another group of people who become more valuable as they become more rare: good editors. Much of the last year, I've been as nervous as I have been excited at walking a publishing tightrope without an editorial net. (My wife, God bless her, has pitched in with copyediting, criticism, and other thankless duties.)

Again, I still feel like I'm in the middle of a provisional experiment. In the spirit of interactivity widely hailed as the hallmark of the new media, I'll end by saying that I'd be glad to hear what you might have to say.

Further Reading:

Theodore R.Sizer's *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School* (Boston, 1984), *Horace's School: Redesigning the American High School* (Boston, 1992), and *Horace's Hope: What Works for the American High School* (Boston, 1996) all use the device of a fictional character. So does Sizer's book coauthored with his wife Nancy Faust Sizer, *The Students are Watching: Schools and the Moral Contract* (Boston, 1999). Katherine Simon includes slices of actual classroom dialogue in her book *Moral Questions in the Classroom: How*

to Get Kids to Think Deeply about Their Life and School Work (New Haven, Conn., 2001). Jim Cullen's complete set of "Felix Chronicles," along with the ongoing "Maria Chronicles" can be accessed at his blog, [American History Now](#).

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