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Sam Chaltain

Five Freedoms Project, Executive Director former Director of First Amendment Schools

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ARTICLE

Ways of Seeing (and of Being Seen): Visibility in Schools

Sam Chaltain

Executive Director, Five Freedoms Project

Former Director, First Amendment Schools

My first teaching experience, in the winter of 1994, was at a public university in Beijing, China.

Hired to teach third-year English majors in an American Literature course, I was 22 and had just graduated from college myself. In the weeks leading up to the class, I grew a beard to try to create the illusion of a greater distance between my age and theirs. I learned later it didn't work.

The night before my first class, I had a series of anxiety dreams. In one version I overslept my morning class, only to have my new bosses wake me by loudly knocking on the door of my dorm room. In another, I was delivering a lesson when, halfway through, I realized I wasn't wearing pants. By the time I did wake up, I felt like I'd already been teaching for hours.

Trimming my beard, combing my hair, and putting on my most professional-looking clothes, I gathered my materials and took the short walk across campus and into room 112. It was a cold February morning. A small group of elderly men and women practiced tai chi in a patch of snow-covered grass along the path. The smell of coal hung in the grey air. Smokey wisps of breath escaped my lips as I struggled to slow my breathing to a manageable rhythm. There is nothing quite like those twin feelings of exhilaration and terror that accompany the moments before one's inaugural solo act as a teacher.

As I reached the door, I heard a few muffled voices happily chatting on the other side. The students at my university were from hometowns all over China; many of them were seeing their friends for the first time in two months. To try to add to the spirit of collegiality, I opened the door, concealed my nerves and issued a hearty and friendly, "Good Morning!"

The room fell silent. I scanned thirty sets of eyes for some sort of reaction, and found nothing. My students were all advanced in English, so much so that the university wanted them to take a subject course with a native speaker. But as the awkwardness grew while I led them through the syllabus, the silence growing ever louder --and longer--in my mind, I started to wonder if I'd entered the wrong room.

After about ten minutes, I turned my back to the class for the first time to write my name on the board. As I did, this silent group of students let out a very loud and collective, "Ooooooh!"

I turned back toward the group--the memories of one particular anxiety dream still fresh in my mind. They giggled in unison, nervously. This is odd, I thought, but at least we're communicating. "What's so funny?" I asked, smiling. A lone hand came up at the back of the class. "Yes?"

"Excuse us," she began, in halting English, "but in China, we believe that people who are left-handed are extremely intelligent."

"I see," I said. "In America, we also believe that to be true."

* * *

As the first day of classes wound down, I started to feel more relaxed and confident. Then I received unexpected news: In each of my classes, one student, who was to remain anonymous to me, was a member of the Communist party. Her task? To ensure that classroom conversations with an American instructor always stayed within “acceptable guidelines.”

It's worth noting that, not long after the semester began, these “anonymous” students introduced themselves to me during office hours, where we respectfully debated the pros and cons of our different societies. Yet the message about the kind of atmosphere the university leadership wanted to establish, and the types of citizens it hoped to graduate, was clear.

As I thought about this, it made sense. In Chinese culture, the needs of the community are valued more than the interests of the individual, and the government believes that maintaining centralized control is a paramount societal concern. In that sense, my university was doing what it was supposed to do: It was reflecting the prevailing notions of what defined the ideal Chinese citizen.

* * *

During my last teaching experience, at a large public high school in Manhattan, the impulse toward censorship was subtler.

The building was a large, industrial-style rectangle of rooms and hallways. The school served 3,500 kids who reflected the diversity of the city. In one class, a third of my 35 students interacted with me every day in their second *or third* languages.

In part because of this diversity, my school leaders believed the best way to ensure a safe learning environment was by maintaining a firm sense of control. I learned this inadvertently one day, about four weeks into my teaching, during the first fire drill of the year.

Although I had never been briefed on the protocol, my students knew exactly what to do when the alarm went off. All of them stood up and moved to the right of their desks, silently awaiting instructions. “OK,” I guessed, “let's go outside.”

As I entered the cavernous hallways, I looked in both directions to see what other classrooms were doing. What I saw were long lines of students, silently awaiting further instructions.

Some educators might feel I've just described their organizational fantasy. But in the weeks and months that followed, I witnessed many ways in which this emphasis on control had reduced the ability of my students to make thoughtful, informed decisions about themselves and their classmates. Some had never even been asked to form an opinion about the material they were studying. The expectations were for them to follow directions and memorize the information we gave them--not to inquire about the nature of knowledge, themselves or their place in the world.

This culture exacted a heavy cost. Indeed, whereas in China it was the government's silencing young people's voices, here in America, where we believe all human beings are born with the inalienable freedom to make choices, my students were growing up in an educational system so focused on control and compliance that they had never learned how to use their voices effectively, just as a muscle that is not utilized will fail to develop.

The Desire to be Visible

Too many of our schools are still structured to reflect an Industrial-Age philosophy about the proper

management of human beings. As Stanford professor Linda Darling-Hammond (1997) explains in her book *The Right to Learn*,

Although schools have changed some in the last one hundred years, most are still organized to impart a largely fact-based, rote-oriented curriculum through structures that do not allow long-term teacher-student relationships or in-depth study. (p. 47)

Darling-Hammond also writes,

Over and over again, research and casual observation reveal that in most bureaucratically organized schools, students feel alienated from teachers, who appear to have little time for students unless they are unusually “bright” or “problematic.” Teachers feel at odds with administrators, who appear to have little time for them unless their concerns pertain to contractual matters, mandates, or paperwork. And everyone feels victimized by the “system,” which demands attention to reports and procedures when teachers, students, and administrators would rather devote their time to each other and to learning. (p. 16)

This approach is no longer tenable. When we as leaders do not trust, believe in, or have opportunities to recognize the true worth and potential of the fellow human beings we are supposed to serve, we manage each other as we would manage inanimate things.

What develops is a vicious cycle. As organizational consultant Stephen Covey (2005) has written,

This widespread reluctance to take initiative, to act independently, only fuels formal leaders' imperative to direct or manage their subordinates. This, they believe, is what they must do in order to get followers to act. . . . Each party's weakness reinforces and ultimately justifies the other's behavior. (p. 17)

The more a principal or a teacher controls, Covey explains,

the more s/he evokes behaviors that necessitate greater control or managing. The co-dependent culture that develops is eventually institutionalized to the point that no one takes responsibility. (p. 17)

All of us have likely experienced this sort of culture at some point in our careers. It is always undesirable. But the stakes are much greater when this sort of dynamic characterizes a school.

I realized this several years ago when, while sharing a meal with a friend who was a journalist, the conversation turned to the American educational system. “If there were only one thing you'd want our public schools to achieve,” he asked me, “what would it be?”

I had not thought of the question so narrowly before. The prompt helped me realize that if there is only one thing I would want schools to guarantee, it would be to help all young people acquire the skills and self-confidence they need to feel *visible* in the world.

As every educator knows, there is in each of us a deep, powerful and fundamental need to be heard. We want to discover our own voice--and learn how to use it effectively. Biology professor James Zull (2002), the Director of Case Western University's Center for Innovation in Teaching and Education and the author of *The Art of Changing the Brain*, speaks of this impulse to participate in biological terms, describing it as the irrepressible “urge to speak” (p. 63).

“Certainly,” he says, “part of the control we believe we have in our lives comes through our belief in

the power of speech. . . Thus, one important rule for helping people learn is *to help the learner feel she is in control*. (p. 52).

For me, this connects directly to democratic practice --after all, there's no better way to learn about "being in control" than having your voice matter! Myles Horton (1997), the founder of the Highlander adult education schools that helped train activists like Rosa Parks, agrees.

I think it's important to understand that the quality of the process you use to get to a place determines the ends, so when you want to build a democratic society, you have to act democratically in every way. . . . When you believe in a democratic society, you must provide a setting for education that is democratic. (p. 227)

In a democracy (or a school), our voices are the chief tools we have to satisfy this basic human desire to be seen and heard by others. Learning how to use language effectively is therefore our chief resource for becoming visible to the world.

This is not some abstract idea of elevated prose - it is the act of helping unlock the mystery of ourselves through the discovery of the right words to explain who we are, what we need, and what we believe. As the poet Alan Grossman (1989) puts it, it is "making persons present to one another in that special sense in which they are *acknowledgeable* and therefore capable of love and mutual interest in one another's safety" (p. 5).

Learning to acknowledge each other, when it occurs, shifts our whole awareness and understanding. We start to see not only each other, but also the world, in new ways. What was invisible becomes visible. What was impossible becomes possible. And what was unknown to others --our unique "voices" and capacity to contribute to the greater good - becomes active, accessible, known.

C. Otto Scharmer (2007), a senior lecturer at MIT and an expert in organizational learning, offers a useful metaphor for this deeper level of understanding and awareness at the organizational level in his book *Theory U*. Scharmer, who grew up on a farm in Germany, remembers his father teaching him to see the fields they tilled with a wider lens.

Each field, he explained to me, has two aspects: the visible, what we see above the surface, and the invisible, or what is below the surface. The quality of the yield--the visible result--is a function of the quality of the soil, of those elements of the field that are mostly invisible to the eye. (p. 8)

Scharmer believes we should see "social fields"^[1] the same way:

Social fields are the *grounding condition*, the living soil from which grows that which only later becomes visible to the eye. And just as every good farmer focuses attention on sustaining and enhancing the quality of the soil, every good organizational leader focuses attention on sustaining and enhancing the quality of the social field - the "farm" in which every responsible leader works day in and day out. (pp. 8 - 9)

The most visible aspects of a school culture, of course, are the things parents, educators and students *do, say and see*. Trophy cases. School bathrooms. Test scores. Cafeteria food. Uniforms. Policies. All are important indicators of a school's quality and commitment to young people. And because these cultural indicators are visible, they end up receiving the bulk of our attention.

By contrast, the invisible parts of a school culture are far more elusive --and essential-- to cultivating a

healthy learning environment. Scharmer describes them as the *inner conditions* from which parents, educators and students operate with each other. Our hopes and fears. Our emotions. The quality of our relationships with each other. The issues we have informally agreed never to discuss. *These* factors, I believe, are the true determinants of a school's success (or failure) at creating a high-functioning school. Yet precisely because they are invisible (and so much harder to work on!), they tend not to factor into most school improvement plans.

The central challenge in any organizational culture, therefore, is to help people become more aware of the inner place from which they operate. "We need to learn to attend to both dimensions simultaneously," says Scharmer. "*What* we say, see, and do (our visible realm), and the *inner place* from which we operate (the invisible realm, in which our sources of attention reside and from which they operate)" (p. 10)

Attending to both dimensions - and striking the right balance between individual and group needs - is an essential goal for any organization.

When a school develops this capacity, it encourages all people to discover the power and uniqueness of their own voices. It helps young people chart a navigable path on their ongoing journeys of personal development. And it helps members of the school community foster more meaningful, trusting relationships with each other.

Democracies, organizations and healthy schools cannot function optimally without a high degree of participation and social trust. This is not, therefore, add-on work; it is the central concern of any organization that wishes to bring out the best in its people.

Invisible Children

As we all know, too many children attend school each day without a sense of their own unique voices--and perhaps even with a horrible certainty of their own invisibility.

Each April 20, we mark another anniversary of the Columbine massacre--our country's most iconic example of what happens when unstable students who feel silenced and marginalized undertake the most destructive means to become visible to their community. The murders at Virginia Tech provide the most recent example of this desperation. Such acts of extreme violence are, thankfully, rare. But they should remind us how explosively hopeless and isolating the feelings of invisibility and voicelessness can be.

I was reminded of this a few years ago, on March 30, 2006: I was reading about the French student riots over a proposed new employment law--later withdrawn by the government in the face of overwhelming pressure--when they were nearing their peak. As of that day, two-thirds of France's universities were overrun by student demonstrators, on strike, or closed.

One of the protest's young leaders, a 17-year-old girl named Floreal Mangin, described waking up the first few days of the protest to burned cars in her neighborhood. Often, she said, as she watched her classmates do it, she would think about what it takes to make someone reach that point. "They were destroying their own neighborhoods," she said in *The Guardian* (March 30, 2006), "smashing their own families' cars, but they had no other way of telling the world they existed."

Her words remind me of the connection between the visible things we *do* (in this case, burning cars), and the invisible emotions and ideas that spur us to *do* them (the need to announce our existence in a world that seems not to see us).

Again I thought of Columbine. Like these French youths, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold lived in a world where words and language were useless, unreliable tools for them. Their choices were different, but the motivation behind their destructive acts, it seems to me, was similar --*they had no other way of telling the world they existed.*

That's a type of hopelessness that can only result in desperation, anger and resignation. I read later in the article that the rallying cry for these young French protesters was not the familiar, optimistic refrain uttered at American rallies for decades ("What do we want? When do we want it?")--it was, "WE ARE DISPOSABLE PIECES OF SHIT."

When I returned from England, my thoughts about visibility led me straight to my bookshelf, and the novel that first introduced me to the concept, Ralph Ellison's classic, *Invisible Man* (1947). (The first time I encountered the book, I was a high school freshman, and I took the title literally--all I could think of was the old horror film in which a mad doctor wraps himself in bandages in order to be seen.)

Ellison's book begins by telling the story of an African-American boy growing up in the Jim Crow South. Before he can fully understand himself, the boy must first discover he is invisible to the white town leaders he is so eager to impress.

In an essay at the front of my edition, Ellison (1990) said this:

If the ideal of achieving a true political equality eludes us in reality - as it continues to do - there is still available that fictional *vision* of a democracy in which the actual combines with the ideal and gives us representations of a state of things in which the highly placed and the lowly, the black and the white, the Northerner and the Southerner, the native-born and the immigrant are combined to tell us of transcendent truths and possibilities such as those discovered when Mark Twain set Huck and Jim afloat on the raft.(p. xx)

A democracy in which the actual combines with the ideal. For Ellison, of course, that was where fiction came in. For parents and educators, that's where our work in public schools, and our faith in the idea that children should be seen *and* heard, come together.

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Notes

[1] Scharmer defines a social field as “the totality of connections through which the participants of a given system relate, converse, think and act together.”