Goals, ideally:

1. You will leave this class having problematized four dominant constructs in American education: ability, race, and social class, and intelligence. [Problematizing is a big word for putting things in their historical and cultural contexts in ways tied to the hope of making them work better for us.]

2. You will leave this class struggling to analyze the influence of these constructs on your activities as teachers not just in classrooms, but in faculty meetings, policy discussions, and teacher gossip rounds. Inequality is as much a conversational as a political and economic problem.

3. You will leave this class looking for ways to continue the discussion across all your classes in STEP and with the many others that make up your personal life. If you find yourself rarely talking about race, class, and ability hierarchies as social problems, you are likely a problem in your own right. This would not be true in a more egalitarian society, but this is the way reality—the one in our classrooms—comes at us.

A Take on the Course

Words like equity and democracy evoke our most fervent hopes for education, prompting us to imagine how schools might just be—and be just—in the best of worlds. Before we follow through on our equity and democracy impulses, with the luxury of a year in STEP, we get to tune our ideas about practices and responsibilities to the real-life complexities of teaching and learning. With equity and democracy in mind, the goal of this course is to encourage a growth in our understanding and appreciation of this complexity – and not simply the complexity of the classroom, but of the terrifically complex relationship between classroom life and the rest of the world.

We strive for responsible descriptions of what is really going on in real lives with real people in them. This means that we have to interrogate our conventional understandings, including the conventional concepts we use to think and talk about school. We proceed as if we should revise our personal dictionary of terms for kids, learning, community, intelligence, and so on, as part of our work for equity and democracy. Perhaps we need to figure out an altogether new vocabulary if we are to get our way.

Of course, we are neither the first nor the only people to take on such a project. In this course, we use the work that others have already done to help us think, talk, and act collectively in more responsible ways. Rather than direct our readings and discussion exclusively toward the search for immediate “best practices,” – always as unsatisfying as they are simplistic — we will work with each other to identify ideas that are useful and/or problematic in some long run: for next month, yes, but for ten years from now as well.

Overall, the course ought to be good, hard fun.

A More Aggressive Take on the Course
Put out a nice meal, and people will know what to do with it. Different people in different ways for different versions of a meal, of course, but the regularities are visible. It is always possible, with careful attention, to pick up and carry out how the members of some group expect people to proceed. It is a matter of manners.

The same for educational problems. Throw a topic on the table – say, tracking, level playing fields, bell curves, abilities and disabilities, race and social class, caring and fairness (these two pitted against reality) – and people will go at them with great regularity. Each problem will be taken seriously, opposing sides will get defined, policies and reforms urged, and moral fibers questioned and asserted. At the end of the day, the year, and even the generation, if all goes well, the changes will have been subtle (not trivial, but subtle), and the overall production and distribution of cultural and economic resources (whether for the dinner table or for schools) may look terribly like they always had. As teachers, our victories will be small, local, and, to that extent, heroically important.

Our course is designed to contribute to the subtle changes by interfering with our – yes, our – knee-jerk responses to the ways educational problems are usually defined. Our three main goals are perhaps in the opposite order than you might expect.

Our first goal is to transform the discussion of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and surprise!, ability and cognitive capacity differences here, right here in CERAS. We have eight days. We cannot solve the problems of the world in eight days, or eight years. This is not an excuse to stop trying. We will try to do it all. We will not be deterred by those who would use our inability to supply a magic bullet to write off thinking hard about where we stand. Back off! The magic bullet thing ain't happening. But we can get the conversation started, and, if we are good, if we really struggle to say what is on our minds, or stuck in the back of our minds, we just might begin to develop an occasional new place to stand in relation to the educational fare usually thrown our way. As a people, it took us decades to figure out that Wonder Bread is awful; and so we might do the same for its educational equivalent, say: the SATs (cookie-cutter questions, with little sustenance or taste). If you leave this course and do not talk politics for the rest of the year, we will have failed terribly. If you leave the course with the knowledge that anything and every can and will be talked about politically, we will have succeeded.

Our second goal is directed to how you think about the problems that develop right in front of your face in your own classrooms filled with children, in your teacher-room discussion, in the ways you read policy reports directed to the public, and so on. What are you going to do with the first child you don't like, or want to give up on, or find one hundred reasons to forget? Or what will you do when you hear teachers bashing on children you love. You will not be alone in these problems. They happen everywhere called educative in American society. There is a way they are the problems of the children you are asked to save and nurture, a way they are your problem, and a way they belong to everyone. How are you going to worry about them? If you leave this course with a different way – any second way, please – of thinking and talking about and responding to our own engagement and investment in the production of the very troubles we are trying to solve, we will have made a contribution to subtle change.

The third effort for change, our third goal, is to worry about how these problems are discussed right here at home for the next ten months. Silence is not be an option.

Assignments

To ensure that you benefit as much as possible from the materials and activities of the course, there are a number of assignments that you are expected to complete to help as we make our way through the course. Come to class ready to talk, argue, and question. Please don't be easy with us. If you are going to make change in the world, you are going to have to be tough. Might as well get some practice shots.

Readings – Please complete the readings listed before each class. These will be integral to participation in activities and discussions each day.

Small-group “Enactments” - In every section, a small group will lead the section in a brief activity to reinforce the key ideas from the readings. These should not be simple summaries or retellings, but rather skits, interactive activities, or other engaging forms lasting around 20 minutes that force us to engage the arguments within the texts. Don’t bore us. It is recommended that groups set to present meet with us the day before their enactment.
In-class Writing - There will be daily “quick-writes,” journal entries, exit slips and other such writing assignments during the section time.

Final Group Project: Group Study (To be further explained on Day 5). The final assignment will call upon you to reflect on your experience with thinking about the professional vision of teaching and the three levels of cultural analysis discussed throughout the course. With your help, we will give you three questions to work on together.

Group Project Presentations – During the last two days of section, groups will present their case study projects to the rest of the group.

Adjustments

We want to leave room for adjustments, particularly ones suggested by you. We can do this in class and/or in our informal coffee meetings that are a great place to say what has to be said.

Schedule

All readings can be found on CourseWork

Monday, 4 August:

The Goodwin paper is a strange entry for an education, but in some way central. This course is not about your opinions. We really do not care about your opinions. We care more about what you do, and Goodwin has mined a level of description that reveals the constraints people put on each other as members of professions. We can fill in the constraints put on new members of the teaching professions.

The concept of professional vision unites the various topics that are covered throughout this course. Professional vision "...consists of organized ways of seeing and understanding events that are answerable to the distinctive interests of a particular social group" (Goodwin, p. 606). In this course we focus on the professional vision of educators and how it can shape their interactions with students, families, colleagues, community members and other stakeholders in the educational system. It is our hope that through making the dominant professional vision of education explicit we can learn to out-think it.

Tuesday, 5 August:

There sure is plenty of diversity in the world, and we sure find a surprising number of ways to cut it up conceptually and institutionally. In the US, we divide by race, gender, sexual orientation, class (always operative, but not always articulated), and often, without even noticing the problems we cause, cognitive power (or just speed); in each case, the popular effort is to describe, and blame, the differences on nature, taken one person at a time, right down to their genes. Other cultures do it differently enough to alert us to the arbitrariness of our own ways of proceeding: height, fertility, strength, memory demand, spiritual tendencies, and supposed beauty have all taken their place as a focus for socialization and sorting.

Our problem as teachers is to make visible to ourselves (and others when necessary and advisable) just how we do our dividing and with what consequences. Talking about the problems is never more than a first step, but nothing happens without it. David Tyack's excellent essay (and his subsequent book) show the many ways diversity has been handled in American history.

Wednesday, 6 August:
Can the concept of culture help us out? Whose culture? And whose concept? And what might culture have to
do with learning, particularly with learning as it seems to happen – and not happen – in the head? Wait:
Whose culture? And who says? Do the portraits cover EPA, or STEP at SUSE? Another place to find
culture at work is in the decision to track/not track in the very classrooms you are going to this year and
will be fully responsible for next year.

Thursday, 7 August:
Read: Henry (1963)

How deep does the competitive urge go? How much tuition are you willing to pay to get an advantage? What
are its downsides? For the kids? For you? Can we teach without it? Are there cultures that do without it? In
schools? On what grounds? With what consequences?
Is all competition dangerous?

Monday, 11 August:
Read: Dewey (1943) School and Society, chapters 1-2
Recommended: Dewey on the socio-economic context of education (on request)

Here it is. In the U.S., if you are not doing Dewey's version in education, Dewey is the thing you are not
doing; nothing else quite counts like that, not Piaget, not Vygotsky, not Skinner. Only the educational
testing services hold as much sway, with the difference that they are more powerful (because they come
complete with a number loaded technology and a promise of selling careers at the top). With that influence
come the strange circumstances of Dewey's influence: that few teachers have ever gotten the chance to
carry Dewey's formulations to completion, and, despite all the talk, almost no one reads him, not even
many of those who cite him in educational research. It is essential that you read him.
The second reading leaves Dewey’s problems of schooling in general to the more particular problems of
talking about race in American schools. There is a tendency to understand racism as the property of a
person. There is something to this, of course, but it can mislead. It allows the belief that if we changed the
minds of racists that we would have no more racism -- as if our opinions were all that mattered. The
readings for this class and the next class are different in that they see racism -- and sexism, cognitivism,
class bias: all that we would like to change, all that makes education difficult – not as individual traits, but
as attitudes put on us by circumstances. Ask not, what are Latinos, or why do Hawaiians act the way they
do, and, by the same phrasing, ask not why white people have racist attitudes about Latinos or Hawaiians.
Ask instead about the circumstances people get put into by warring labels, constraints, and contradictions.
Then we can ask about how to rearrange the circumstances better to usher a new generation of kids into a
life of inquiry. This might also help to serve better a democracy that has promised itself equal rights and
opportunities for all.

Tuesday, 12 August:
Read: Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

Sure is hard to imagine how to teach to and/or around all the difficulties Morrison explores. Are they
problems or opportunities to think and rethink? Whose problems are they? Did Morrison get it right?
Whatever might “right” mean? How many people are involved in our being where we are today? Why did
they have to work so hard – to the point of jail time – at doing what would seem to just common sense?
Their version of common sense is going to be terribly difficult to operate on – it will be uncommon – in the
public schools of California? What are our alternatives?
Today we get to ask how Horton and Freire would handle the problems described by Dewey, Pollock, and Morrison.

One great trap in human thought is to divide knowledge into theory and practice. Our take, and so too Dewey, Horton and Freire, and Mehan: no theory, no practice; no practice, no theory. So the question always is how to do better theory and better practice. If your practice is not theoretically interesting, don’t bother; if your theory doesn’t apply to practice, don’t bother (or call it a hobby).

No theory, no practice. Even dumb practice is driven by a theory, likely a lousy one. No practice, no theory. Even dumb theory is driven by a practice, likely a lousy one. Without a theory and practice split, there would be no way, at least not in a self-proclaimed democracy, to maintain a sophisticated replication of injustices and inequalities. Without a theory and practice split, there would be no way for school people and researchers (also people, of a kind, although not always kind) to not learn from each other and to leave the vast darkness of the teaching and learning business so thoroughly unobscured.