Breaking the Fourth Wall: Moodle in the Time of Fascism

Last week, a professor broke the fourth wall with our class. She acknowledged that many students had been chronically absent, and that the syllabus might have to be reconfigured. “The world is going to shit right now,” she said. “And so I’ve been thinking that we need to renegotiate the contract of labor we made with each other.”

In media studies, the fourth wall is the imaginary barrier that separates the story from reality. Breaking it has existential implications: It means a character is acknowledging their role in a fictional world. When done correctly, it can act as a breath of fresh air. Instead of talking *at* you, the character talks *to* you. Not everyone likes breaches of the fourth wall, though. Stories ask us to suspend our disbelief, and in exchange they entertain us, comfort us, or help us see the world from a different perspective. Breaching the fourth wall is like a breach of contract. It reminds us of the reality we inhabit — a reality that may be distressing, ugly, and unjust. A world from which we were hoping to get a break, if only for a few minutes.

The promise of education is also a story — a story that sets the groundwork for a social contract between students and the institutions that teach them. Education can be a lot of different things. For a privileged few, it is an opportunity to live on a campus near your friends, participate in extracurriculars, and take classes unrelated to career goals for the pure pleasure of learning. For others, education is a chance at a better future; a way to circumvent inherited circumstances. For most, perhaps, education is simply a means to an end. Securing a well-paying job is much harder without a college degree, which is why millions of young people go into debt every year just trying to get one.

Maybe you believe education will make you a better citizen. Maybe you want a job that requires an advanced degree. Maybe your parents practically dragged you to your dorm. Regardless of your reason, the story is that your education will help prepare you, in some way, for a wider world beyond the walls of the classroom. That preparedness is so valuable that students are expected to sacrifice significant amounts of their money and their time, and their effort in exchange for it.

Fundamental changes in the wider world, then, should have implications for what we expect out of our education, and for what our educators expect from us. If the point of an education is to equip us for the challenges of the world beyond graduation, it seems important that such a world awaits us at all. We take for granted the solidity of institutions, the continuity of certain plot lines. When the story fails us, maybe our contract needs to be redrawn.

***

We are living through a narrative collapse. For many young people, the promises older adults made us about the future are no longer true. Like bedtime stories, they have disintegrated into nonsense under the terrible weight of their own unreality. In these kinds of periods — when it is too late to keep repeating old stories, and too early to construct new ones — life becomes a series of images, disparate loose beads without a narrative thread. Processing the cultural upheaval of the 1960s in her book "The White Album," Joan Didion writes "I was supposed to have a script, and had mislaid it. I was supposed to hear cues, and no longer did. I was meant to know the plot, but all I knew was what I saw: flash pictures in variable sequence, images with no 'meaning' beyond their temporary arrangement, not a movie but a cutting-room experience."

I have half-lucid memories of tracking the 2008 presidential election with my mother on our living room floor, placing small blue and red stickers on an oversized paper map. I remember Barack Obama winning, and drinking sparkling apple cider out of a plastic cup. My brother and I had been allowed to stay up past our bedtime, because the man on the glowing TV screen, the leader of the free world, was "just like us, because he also has a black daddy and a white mommy. See?" We were told this was important, getting to see the texture of our hair on a news channel we never watched. We were too young to be told about him bailing out the banks after the market crashed, about bombs dropped from drones on children more "just like us" than he was, or that he would be continually undercut by politicians across the aisle that cared more about his suit color — and his skin color — than his policies. Donald Trump's first win, even, was quickly written off as an aberration, a suspicion confirmed for many by Joe Biden's victory in 2020. Liberals, including Obama, love quoting Dr. Martin Luther King's famous adage that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." It is a promise of karmic proportions, a guarantee that narrative and parable will always prevail. I think back to all of the times I've had that quote thrown at me, and remember the taste of 2008 apple cider. Sequences of memories that used to be legible as something like "progress" now seem unintelligible, a series of jagged images whose edges refuse to be aligned in any order.

Determined to break narrative convention, President Trump recently ordered the Department of Education to be dissolved. This comes as schools are still struggling with the long impacts of COVID shutdowns on childrens' education. According to a PEW research study, the vast majority of K-12 teachers (82%) say that schools have gotten worse in the past five years. Under-preparation in K-12 makes it harder for students to succeed in college, should they choose to go — an experience for which they would likely be charged thousands of dollars more than people in their parents' or grandparents' generation. And what about after school? The newly-minted Department of Government Efficiency has announced that it will cut 300,000 jobs

from the federal workforce. Funding for the Fulbright grant has been suspended indefinitely, and scientific research of all kinds has been similarly gutted through the withholding of funds. A common complaint I hear from teachers — and from older adults in general — is that young people won't get off their screens. But why should we? It is this same generation of adults that has recklessly forged ahead with AI development, a technology that seems poised to replace many of the jobs that an education was supposed to prepare human beings for.

The stories we used to tell ourselves about education are no longer true. Students may learn how to read and write, only for an employer to discover that a chatbot can do it for cheaper. They may train for years in labs, only to get funding pulled when autocrats seize power. They may care deeply about building a more equitable world through the social sciences, only to have every effort to talk about race, gender, or sexuality derided as "DEI" and "woke."

***

Social contract theory was developed in order to help us understand why people would choose to live their lives in a society governed by some greater power. Theoretically, humans are born with complete freedom of will. Why give up any of that freedom? Thomas Hobbes was the first to articulate social contract theory as we know it today. Basically, he argues, government is an exchange. You may choose to give up some of your freedoms in exchange for security. Because resources are scarce, humans are doomed to be in perpetual competition with one another in order to survive. Government allows for sustained and complex cooperation. It has the power to enforce rules that ensure that we don't have to live our lives in a state of infinite war, a world in which the strongest have absolute power over the weakest. Governments may restrict some of our freedoms, but they also give us a shot at a better, more secure life.

The promise of education is similar — school can make significant impositions on your time, on your freedom, on your finances. The story is that it will provide you with a better, more secure life. What happens when that narrative starts to fail? What happens when students are still being asked to make the same sacrifices, even as the value of an education becomes less certain? When the world seems to be falling apart?

Some may say that the value of a liberal arts education — one where people are taught to think critically, listen carefully, and embrace curiosity — only becomes more valuable in an uncertain and chaotic world. I don't disagree; but it's clear that the educational exchange is not what it used to be. I think schools owe it to their students to reckon with that reality, and what it means for the implicit contracts it has with each one of them.

***

At Amherst College, there is almost no sign that the world is not what it used to be. Sometimes I catch glimpses of it in the titles of academic talks, or the rare political poster, or the way everyone seems to be more depressed, more confused, more quick to anger. We are expected to perform the script of business as usual, expected to adhere to narrative conventions, expected to hear our cues and follow them.

Almost none of my classes have addressed the state of the outside world in a way that feels real and more than cursory. We are reluctant, it seems, to rearrange the syllabi, to redirect the discussion, to acknowledge that the ship is filling with water despite our best efforts to play through it.

There will always be politics, and there will always be emergencies. I don't mean to suggest that we fundamentally rearrange our lives every time the political party we disagree with takes power, or every time disaster strikes. But there is something unique about this moment, and I hope we do not collectively enable each other to miss its importance. Immigrants are being rounded up and disappeared. President Trump keeps publicly toying with the idea of a third term. What would it look like to reckon with these realities inside the classroom more often? What would it mean to encourage students to focus less on Moodle posts and more on community engagement and political participation?

My plea to all of us is that we break the fourth wall. It is becoming harder to sustain the fiction that everything is as it used to be, and that it will continue as it was. That the imagined futures which stalk our nightmares will remain locked within the darkness of our own heads. The school makes it easy to live our lives within the bubble of this imaginary world. But there is a wider world outside, the same world our education was supposed to prepare us for. Was that not the point?

"We tell ourselves stories in order to live," Didion writes, imposing "a narrative line upon disparate images, by the 'ideas' with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience." At some point in the future, we will be able to wrangle the images of our country back into a cohesive narrative. In the meantime, though, I think we need to ask ourselves how we can best serve our present.

What do we owe each other when the narrative collapses? What kinds of contracts are still fair? I'm not sure. Let's start with reality, and see where it leads us.