

Lessons for Living

On the limits of school-based education

by *Hervé Varenne*

In a powerful episode of the HBO series "The Wire," an inner-city classroom, where teacher and students prepare for a standardized test all know the children will fail, is chillingly juxtaposed with a warehouse where gang members teach a recruit how to kill a cop.

Therein lies the problem facing all educational authority: education will not be controlled. Children succeed at or fail tests that others design and then must live the rest of their lives with the consequences. Children inducted into gangs and guerilla bands receive an education as essential for drug trafficking or insurgency as other training is for drug policing and military campaigns—and arguably with more consistent success. Still others attend evangelical churches and learn to doubt evolution.

"The Wire" also reminds us that education is dangerous; that there is no such thing as a "low-stakes" test when

one's life is in the balance; and that humans are most active when faced with a threatening puzzle. Whether confronted with a testing requirement or a counter-attack by a cop, one must identify possibilities for what to do

People keep on educating themselves and each other because lessons—whether learned early or late in life or in or out of school—reveal themselves as a source of ignorance.

next, work with and against others, and then start learning and teaching all over again as others react. Put another way, people keep on educating themselves and each other because lessons—whether learned early or late in life or in or out of school—reveal themselves as a source of ignorance.

Yes, as Dewey argued, we redefine ourselves with each new

experience. Yet as he also knew, but sometimes forgot, this process cannot be tamed by even the most enlightened of state policies about schooling, after-school programs or funding mechanisms. The impact of all such

programs will be imprecise, as totalitarian regimes always find. More importantly, they become a puzzle for those who must live by them and thus trigger further self-education. We at Teachers College must understand: the more

oppressed people are, the more likely they are to educate themselves about us—and we may not like what they get to know.

It's a lesson we must ponder.

Hervé Varenne is Professor of Education in the Department of International and Transcultural Studies. His work can be viewed at <http://varenne.tc.columbia.edu>.

