

The Lines We Draw¹

Centre for Socio-Analytic Exploration

Working Paper No. 1

Published in the “Teacher” September, 2004

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During a Workshop exploring “*The Child at School in the Adult at Work*”² we each did an individual drawing of our experiences at school, and later in the day did a drawing of how we pictured our work as adults. While each of us has his / her own way of doing a drawing some interesting patterns emerged concerning our pictures of school experiences and pictures of adult work.

What is the nature of the “lines” we draw when we conceive of our school experiences and when we conceive of our adult experiences? The lines we draw can connect, divide, contain, and categorise experiences. One of the school themes which emerged during the day, particularly for men, was of structure and uniformity – pictured as tracks, rectangular school buildings, square windows with bars like a prison, rectangular school tables, a rectangular school room with uniform rows of students depicted as dots, a climbing frame with rungs like a “track” – as though the experience was a grid, (like a meat grinder, or strainer), through which further experiences had to “go through”. It was as though a rectangular template for life was being constructed from one’s school experiences.

One of the members of the Workshop, who went to a Catholic School, drew Christ being crucified on the Cross as part of his experiences at school. A cross can be thought of as the inside part of a rectangular grid with the outside lines removed. The straining out of individual spirit, and giving over individual spirit to “school spirit”, was one of the aspects of school life reported by members of the Workshop.

In the drawings, the uniformity, or structure, was often associated with hierarchy. In one drawing the teachers were big and the students small. The students all looked the same. In this drawing the students had rectangular gags over their mouths, indicating they couldn’t speak what was on their minds, while the larger teachers hovered over them. I would hypothesise that it is through this rectangular world³ that the child at school is inducted into adult mysteries of hierarchy and control. For the male members of the Workshop who had been to this kind of school there seemed to be four kinds of path, in some senses choice, resulting from this exposure to adult hierarchy and control:

¹ I would like to thank Joshua Bain for his help in framing some of these thoughts, and the observations about Socrates and wonder.

² The Workshop took place in Carlton, Victoria, on January, 15, 2004, and 11 people from different professional backgrounds took part. The Consultants to the Workshop were Alastair Bain, Joshua Bain, and Peter Hetelezis. They also did drawings.

³ Of gags, school tables, school rooms, tracks, “prison windows” etc.

1. To identify with the sameness, and related powerlessness, of the students at the bottom of this hierarchy – (with one’s rectangular gag on one was indistinguishable from the other students).
2. To become a different colored dot (at least to oneself) to the other countless “student dots”.
3. To identify with the emergent hierarchy within oneself at the school, as a House Captain where one is big and other students become small and indistinguishable (pictured around rectangular tables), or one is the fastest athlete, and wins the race on the running track (while the other athletes become “losers”).
4. To escape from the hierarchy through “scarlet pimpernel” activities at nighttime, and become a “protector” of the weak at the school.

These school experiences have had a powerful effect in determining and moulding the adult roles these workshop members have taken up. One became a brilliant and innovative School Principal, who devised new ways for students and teachers to interact – without the gags. Another is a successful Management Consultant. In the school picture he was a dot person surrounded by rectangular school buildings. As an adult he pictured himself getting off a vehicle on a track or treadmill, and finding his own winding path. And a third person (protector of the weak at school) has worked for part of his adult life in devising and implementing innovative prison reforms. In these instances the school experience, and how it is seen and felt, is fundamental in influencing how they took up an adult work role.

For the prison reformer it is a continuation of a school role of protecting the weak from the consequences of a harsh and uniform hierarchy. For the School Principal, and Management Consultant, their adult work roles are directed to modifying the hierarchy and control experienced as a student, and replacing it with freedom of expression, and individual choice. It has meant “unlearning” the adult patterns of authority at school, and finding different sources of authority in oneself and others, in ways that can connect rather than divide.

Which brings us to a different kind of line in the drawings of school and work, particularly in women members’ drawings, but also present in some of the men members’ drawings. The lines don’t make rectangles, but are wavy lines to connect people, or activities, or to separate into stages, and circular lines to contain an experience, or an activity, and possibly nurture it. In the school drawings done by women in the Workshop there isn’t the sense of being inducted into adult models of hierarchy and control as there was for most of the men’s drawings. School is a place for different activities, for being with other people, for growing bigger, and for being good at some things. The circles and wavy connecting lines can be taken into the adult world of work: connecting activities and people one is responsible for as a manager, or containing the different experiences and emotions one has in one’s role as a chaplain, or linking the activities involved in childbirth, and in a hospital, as a midwife manager.

In a work hierarchy the force or pressure is from the top down. If there is a force or pressure equivalent in the work world of circles and wavy lines, it may be the balance of centripetal and centrifugal forces, and gravitational forces of “planets”, “systems” circling a

“sun”. In a traditional bureaucratic hierarchy authority is delegated downwards from the CEO to the worker at the bottom of the hierarchy. Each level is dependent on the level(s) above. In the balance of “systems circling” model there is a sense of interdependence, and mutually generated authority.

The circles that contain an experience, and possibly nurture it, and wavy connecting lines, are not absent in men’s drawings. For two men they were present for their kindergarten, and primary school experiences, led by women teachers (one of whom was a nun). But at senior school the circles of connection disappear and are replaced by the rectangles symbolic of hierarchy. For older males where once was a sense of the “whole circle”, and generative force, there is now an organisational shape that is hard, and isolating, and sometimes abusive (a ruler over the backside). For the youngest male in the group (with the most recent school experience) a containing circle, wavy line had been drawn, like an egg shell, around himself growing.

Sometimes there are no lines joining the activities / experiences in both men and women’s drawings. They are just there, or are connected by numbers – ages and dates etc. -, or perhaps one’s name, written in beautiful letters, is the connecting theme. There are also hints in a few drawings of taking personal authority to work at the task of exploration – in a sense the lines come out of the person as a connection with others, rather than being part of a given – a rectangle, or a circle.

For all of us there is a question of what kind of lines we develop at school. (Interestingly, one member of the Workshop wrote her school motto in large letters at the top of her drawing. The motto is “Nulla Dies Sine Linea”, which presages the theme of this note). Do the lines confine our adult experiences at work to hierarchies of command and control, or free us for developing personal authority for individual and organisational creativity, and allow us to grow mutual authorities for task? If we reject the value of the rectangle as a container for experience, the anxiety is that we would be faced with chaos. But possibly other lines that are for connection and expression may be drawn, which have their sources not in anxiety and obedience, but in wonder, and what may grow from wonder.

Socrates believed wonder to be the beginning of philosophy. It is also the beginning of a child’s educative experience, and what is most in need of nurturing and development for a student’s growth. It would be a shame if we, as adults, thought children to have a monopoly on wonder, and its potential to unlimit or free up our relation to our work.