

I Won't Learn From You!

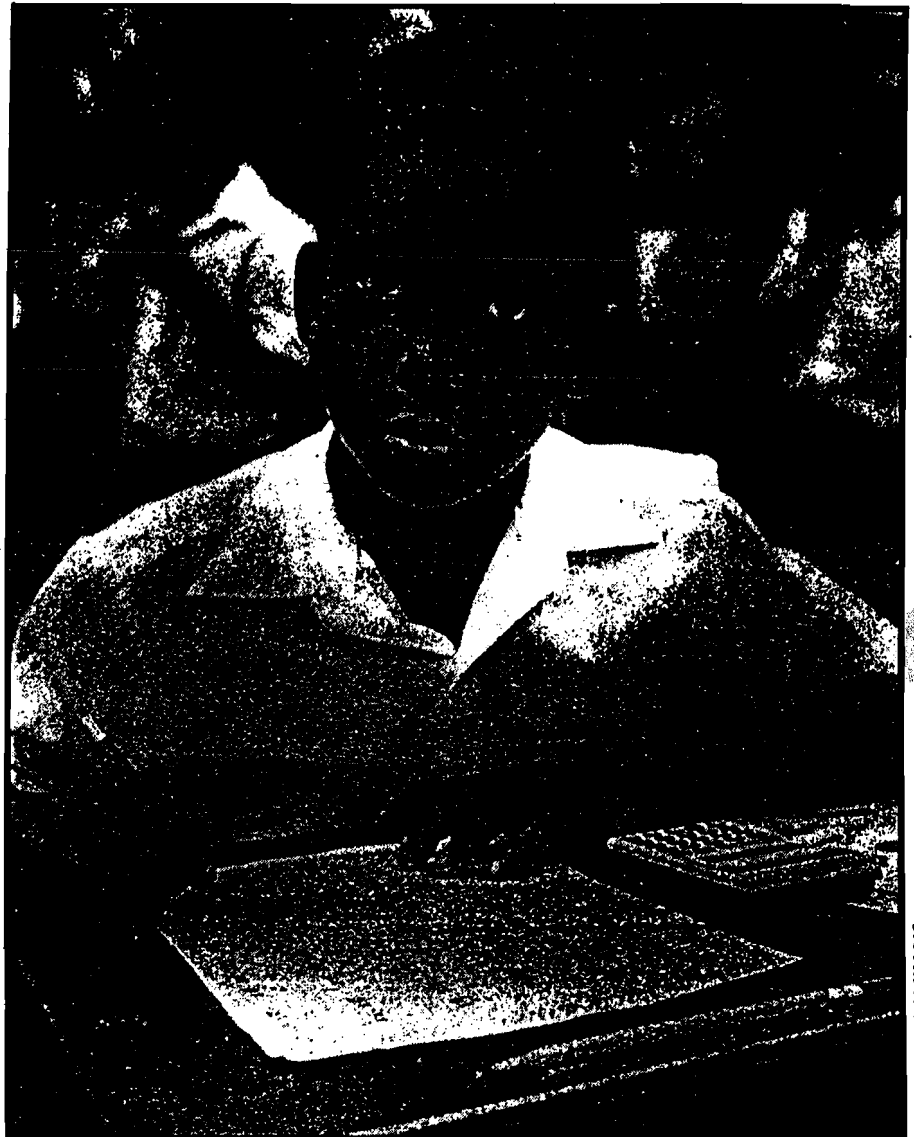
Thoughts on the Role of Assent in Learning

By Herbert Kohl

Years ago, one of my fifth-grade students told me that his grandfather Wilfredo wouldn't learn to speak English. He said that no matter how hard you tried to teach him, he ignored whatever words you tried to teach and forced you to speak to him in Spanish. When I got to know his grandfather I asked, in Spanish, whether I could teach him English and he told me unambiguously that he did not want to learn. He was frightened, he said, that his grandchildren would never learn Spanish if he gave in like the rest of the adults and spoke English with the children. Then, he said, they would not know who they were. At the end of our conversation he repeated adamantly that nothing could make him learn to speak English, that families and cultures could not survive if the children lost their parents' language, and, finally, that learning what others wanted you to learn can sometimes destroy you.

I discussed Wilfredo's reflections with several friends, and they interpreted his remarks as a cover-up of either his own fear of trying to learn English or his failure to do so. These explanations, however, show a lack of respect for Wilfredo's ability to judge what is appropriate learning for himself and his grandchildren. By attributing failure to Wilfredo and refusing to acknowledge the loss his family would experience through not knowing Spanish, they turned a cultural problem into a personal psychological problem: they turned willed refusal to learn into failure to learn.

I've thought a lot about Wilfredo's conscious refusal to learn English and have great sympathy for his decision. I grew up in a partially bilingual family and in a house shared by my parents, born in New York City, and grandparents, born in the Yiddish-speaking Polish part of the Jewish settlements in East Europe called the Pale, and know what it is like to face the problem of not-learning and the dissolution of culture. In addition I have encountered willed not-learning throughout my 30 years of teaching, and believe that such not-learning is often and disastrously mistaken



Credit: Rick Reinhard

How can teachers learn to distinguish willful not-learning from failure?

for failure to learn or the inability to learn.

Learning how to not-learn is an intellectual and social challenge; sometimes you have to work very hard at it. It consists of an active, often ingenious, willful rejection of even the most compassionate and well-designed teaching. It subverts attempts at remediation as much as it rejects learning in the first place. It was through insight into my own not-learning that I began to understand the inner world of

students who chose to not-learn what I wanted to teach. Over the years I've come to side with them in their refusal to be molded by a hostile society and have come to look upon not-learning as positive and healthy in many situations.

Not-learning tends to take place when someone has to deal with unavoidable challenges to her or his personal and family loyalties, integrity, and identity. In such

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continued

situations, there are forced choices and no apparent middle ground. To agree to learn from a stranger who does not respect your integrity causes a major loss of self. The only alternative is to not-learn and reject their world.

In the course of my teaching career, I have seen children choose to not-learn many different skills, ideas, attitudes, opinions, and values. At first I confused not-learning with failing. When I had youngsters in my classes who were substantially "behind" in reading I assumed that they had failed to learn how to read. Therefore I looked for the sources of their failure in the reading programs they were exposed to, in their relationships with teachers and other adults in authority, in the social and economic conditions of their lives. I assumed that something went wrong when they faced a written text: that either they made errors they didn't know how to correct, or were the victims of bad teaching. Other causes of failure I searched for were mismatches between the students' language and the language of the schools, or between the students' experiences and the kind of experience presupposed by their teachers or the reading texts.

In all of these cases I assumed that my students had failed at something they had tried to do. Sometimes I was correct, and then it was easy to figure out a strategy to help them avoid old errors and learn, free of failure. But there were many cases I came upon where obviously intelligent students were beyond success or failure when it came to reading or other school-related learning. They had consciously placed themselves outside the entire system that was trying to coerce or seduce them into learning and spent all of their time and energy in the classroom devising ways of not-learning and short-circuiting the business of learning altogether. They were engaged in a struggle of wills with authority, and what seemed to be at stake for them was nothing less than their pride and integrity. Most of them did not believe they were failures or inferior to students who succeeded on the school's terms, and it was easy to distinguish them from the wounded self-effacing students who wanted to learn and had not been able to do so.

Barry's Not-Learning

I remember one student, Barry, who was in one of my combined kindergarten / first-grade classes in Berkeley in the 1970s. He

had been held back in the first grade by his previous teacher for being uncooperative, defiant, and "not ready for the demands of second grade." He was sent to my class because it was multi-age graded, and the principal hoped I could get him to catch up and go on with other students his age by the end of the year. Barry was confident and cocky but not rude. From his comments in class it was clear that he was quite sensitive and intelligent. The other students in the class respected him as the best fighter and athlete in class, and as a skilled and funny story teller.

During the first week of school one of the students mentioned to me that their last year's teacher was afraid of Barry. I've seen a number of cases where white teachers treat very young African American boys as

effect he wanted. He was let alone and as a bonus gained status in the eyes of the other children as someone teachers feared. Not-reading, as tragic as it might become in his future, was very successful for him as a kindergartner. My job as a teacher was to get him to feel more empowered doing reading than practicing his active not-learning to read.

I developed a strategy of empowerment for Barry and didn't even bother with thinking about remediation. I was convinced he could learn to read perfectly well if he assented to learn how to read. The strategy was simple and involved a calculated risk. I decided to force him to read with me and then make it appear to other members of the class that he read so well that his past resistance was just a game

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if they were 17, over six feet tall, addicted to drugs, and menacing. Barry was a victim of that manifestation of racism. He evidently was given the run of the school the previous year - was allowed to wander around the halls at will, refuse participation in group activities, and avoid any semblance of academic work. Consequently he fell behind and was not promoted from first to second grade.

The first time I asked Barry to sit down and read with me he threw a temper tantrum and called me all kinds of names. We never got near a book. I had to relate to his behavior, not his reading. There was no way for me to discover the level of his skills or his knowledge of how reading works. I tried to get him to read a few more times and watched his responses to me very carefully. His tantrums were clearly manufactured on the spot. They were a strategy of not-reading. He never got close enough to a book to have failed to learn how to read.

The year before, this response had the

he controlled. The goal was to have him show me up in class, as if his past failure was a joke he was playing on us all, and display to the entire class reading ability he didn't know he had.

I prepared myself for a bit of drama. One Monday afternoon I asked Barry to come read with me. Naturally all of the other students stopped whatever they were doing and waited for the show. They wanted to see if Barry would be able to not-read one more time. He looked at me, then turned around and walked away. I picked up a book and went over to him. Then I gently but firmly sat him down in a chair and sat down myself. Before he could throw the inevitable tantrum I opened the book and said, "Here's the page you have to read. It says, 'This is a bug. This is a jug. This is a bug in the jug.' Now read it to me." He started to squirm and put his hands over his eyes. Only I could see a sly grin forming as he snuck a look at the book. I had given him the answers, told him exactly what he had

do to show me and the rest of the class that he knew how to read all along. It was his decision: to go on playing his not-learning game or accept my face-saving gift and open up the possibility of learning to read. I offered him the possibility of entering into a teaching/learning relationship with me without forcing him to give up any of his status and fortunately he accepted the gift. He mumbled "This is a bug, this is a jug. This is a bug in a jug," then tossed the book on the floor, and, turning to one of the other children, said defiantly, "See, I told you I already know how to read."

This ritual battle was repeated all week and into the next, subsiding slowly as he felt that the game was no longer necessary and that he was figuring out the relationship of letter to sounds, words and meaning. After a while reading became just another one of the things that Barry did in class. I never did any remedial teaching or treated him as a failed reader. In fact, I was able to reach him by acknowledging his choice to not-learn and by tricking him out of it. However, if he had refused assent, there is no way I could have forced him to learn to read. That was a very important lesson to me. It helped me understand the essential role will and free choice play in learning and taught me the importance of considering people's stance towards learning in the larger context of the choices they make as they create lives and identities for themselves.

Over the years I've known many youngsters who chose to actively not-learn what school, society, or their families tried to teach them. Not all of them were potential victims of their own choices to not-learn. For some, not-learning was a strategy that made it possible for them to function on the margins of society instead of falling into madness or total despair. It helped them build a small safe world in which their feelings of being rejected by family and society could be softened. Not-learning played a positive role and enabled them to take control of their lives and get through difficult times.

The Struggles of Akmir

Akmir, a young African American man I had the privilege of knowing for the last three years of his life, was wiser than I was, and struggled to learn and maintain his culture and learn his roots despite a racist school system that he was required to attend. In school he was a passionate not-learner. I remember him telling me of spending a semester in a junior high school social studies class not merely not-learning the subject but actively trying to destroy the teacher's and text book's credibility. Akmir had joined a militant separatist group that was an offshoot of the Nation of Islam.

They believed that they were among the 7% of African Americans who understood the truth that the white man was a devil and had to be ruthlessly rooted out and destroyed. One of their goals was purifying Harlem of all whites.

Akmir's experiences with whites did very little to refute the 7%ers' analysis. That opinion accurately applied to one of Akmir's high school history teachers who believed that his students, who were all African American and Puerto Rican, were stupid, lazy, and not capable of understanding complex ideas. He talked to the class in a condescending way, addressing them as "you" as in, "You people don't know how to hold a job," and "You people have never learned to adopt American values and that's why you can't compete in the marketplace."

Most of the students were content to not-learn what he taught by playing dumb. A few actually learned what he taught and believed that they were stupid and incapable of productive lives. Akmir and one friend, Thomas X, were actively defiant. They not only refused to learn what he taught, but

tried to take over the class and change the curriculum into an attack on white racism. Whenever he talked about American values, for example, they would point out that slavery was an American value according to the Constitution, and try to demonstrate that racism, not lack of intelligence or ability, was the root of black failure and poverty. The teacher tried to shut them up, referred them to the guidance counselor, sent them to the principal, and, in every way but answering their challenges, tried to silence them. Nothing worked, since Akmir and Thomas X refused to accept the validity of school authority and preached to the principal and the counselors the same line they preached in class. After one semester of bitter struggle within the school, both Akmir and Thomas X were transferred to a special school for students with discipline problems who had no criminal records. These were schools for youngsters who had mastered strategies of not-learning and infuriated school authorities but had done nothing wrong. They were created to segregate teachers who were failing their students from their angry victims, within an already racially segregated system.

I didn't know Akmir until three years after he left high school. He had passed all of his classes, but his diploma had been withheld from him for "citizenship" reasons. The principal and guidance counselor decided that he wasn't a loyal American, since he raised questions which they interpreted as anti-American. They decided that he didn't deserve to graduate because of this attitude and decreed that he had to take and pass a course in citizenship sometime during the two years after his

class graduated in order to receive the diploma he had earned by passing all the required courses. They also told him that they would decide what work or school experience could count as a citizenship class sometime in the future. Akmir told them what he thought of them before leaving the school for what he believed was the last time.

At the time (it was 1965) I was a graduate student at Teachers College, Columbia University, and Betty Rawls, another graduate student, and I were teaching a class in psychology for a group of high-school-aged students who were older brothers and sisters of former students of mine from Harlem. Brenda Jackson, one of the students, brought Akmir to class one day. They were a bit late, and when they arrived the class was discussing whether Freudian ideas applied to teenagers growing up in Harlem. The discussion was quite lively, but when Brenda and Akmir came into the room, everyone fell silent. Brenda sat down, but Akmir remained standing and looked straight at me. I noticed how strong he looked, both physically and mentally.

Since everyone else in the room remained silent, I talked about my understanding of Freud and brought up some questions I had about some main Freudian concepts. After about five minutes Akmir took a few steps towards the front of the room and said, quietly but fiercely, "That's white man's psychology."

I didn't disagree, and suggested he go into his reasons for making that statement. He said there was no point in doing it for a white man, and I told him he was wrong, adding that though Freud was a white man, he also was a bourgeois Viennese Jew who grew up in the late 1800s and it was unclear whether his ideas were adequate to account for the psychology of non-Jews, of working class people, of women, and of young people in the 1960s as well as of blacks.

He pushed aside my comments and began a harangue on racism, injustice, and the Wilderness of North America, which was the way Black Muslims referred to the United States. I got angry and told him that the class was voluntary, that he could leave if he wanted to, but that we were there to learn together, and I wasn't bullshitting

about wanting to know his ideas. Any intelligent position could be presented, defended, argued, but learning couldn't take place without respect for everybody's voice.

The students anxiously glanced back and forth from Akmir to me. I rested my case and he smiled and said, "Well, maybe we should start with ego psychology and see what ego means for white people and for black people." I agreed and we entered into that discussion.

After class Akmir came up and introduced himself. I told him that his questions and challenges were just what the class needed and invited him to join us. Betty and I usually assigned material to be read for each class, but most of the students didn't get around to reading it so we began each class summarizing the issues we intended to discuss. Akmir read everything, studied it thoroughly and came to class prepared to argue. He read all of the material aggressively, looking for sentences or phrases that indicated or could be interpreted to imply racism, ranging from uses of the words "black" or "dark" to signify evil to sophisticated arguments that implied the superiority of Western culture. For a few sessions the class was dominated by his questioning our texts. At first I thought it was a game meant to provoke me, but it soon became clear that that was an egotistic response on my part. Akmir was hunting down American English for insinuations of racism and trying to purify the language. He had learned some of these techniques from the Black Muslims and 7ers who were very skillful in hunting out claims of European pureness and African primitivity, and who understood that when sophisticated Westerners were contrasted with unsophisticated peoples of color, racism was afoot.

I learned from Akmir's analyses how I too fell into sloppy, racist linguistic habits and came to take his criticisms seriously. I tried to read texts from his point of view and pick out the phrases and thoughts that he might find offensive. In some cases it made reading some familiar material very uncomfortable. I had thought of having the class analyze Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* from a psychoanalytic point of view, but decided to abandon that exercise because, on rereading it with Akmir's

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sensitivities in mind, the explicit and offensive racism at the heart of the story appalled me. I knew before that the story

could be interpreted as racist, but now always felt that that was just a secondary, unfortunate aspect of an extraordinary piece of writing. This time, though the quality of the writing wasn't diminished by my new reading, the story had become repugnant to me. The racism became the primary characteristic of the writing, not a secondary one that could be understood and explained away in light of Conrad's cultural background and historical situation. And I understood that I shouldn't teach *The Heart of Darkness* unless I was to deal explicitly with the text's racism and condemn Conrad.

Last year, more than 20 years after this incident, I read an essay by the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe entitled, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" (in *Hopes and Impediments*, Doubleday 1989, pp.1-20) that confirmed my analysis of the Conrad story. In the essay, Achebe, after making his case against Conrad, states quite unambiguously, "The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked." (page 11)

The Lessons of San Antonio

Over the years I've come to believe that many of the young people who fail in our schools do so for the same reasons Akmir did and use many of the same strategies he adopted. I remember visiting some teacher friends in San Antonio, Texas, about 15 years ago. I was there trying to help in their struggles to eliminate anti-Latino racism in the public schools in the barrios. There were very few Latino teachers and no Latino administrators in barrio schools in the parts of San Antonio where my friends worked. Many of the administrators were Anglo, retired military personnel from the San Antonio air force base who had hostile, imperialist attitudes towards the children they taught and the communities they served. I was asked by a community group, as an outsider and as an Anglo myself, to visit a number of classrooms and participate in some workshops discussing the specific ways in which racism functioned in their schools.

In one junior high I was invited to observe a history class by a teacher who admitted that he needed help with this particular group of students, all of whom were Latino. The teacher gave me a copy of his textbook, and I sat in the back of the room and followed the lesson for the day, which was entitled, "The first people to settle Texas." The teacher asked for someone to volunteer to read and no one responded. Most of the students were slumped down in their desks and none of them looked directly at the teacher. Some gazed off into space, others exchanged glimpses and grimaces. The teacher didn't ask for attention and started to read the text

people to settle Texas arrived from New England and the South in" Two boys in the back put their hands in their eyes, there were a few giggles and some murmuring. One hand shot up and that student blurted out, "What are we, animals or something?" The teacher's response was, "What does that have to do with the text?" Then he decided to abandon the lesson, introduced me as a visiting teacher who would substitute for the rest of the period and left the room.

I don't know if he planned to do that all along and set me up to fail with the students just as he did, or if his anger at being observed overcame him and he decided to dump the whole thing on me. Whatever the motivation, he left the room, and I was there with the students. I went up front and reread the sentence from the book and asked the class to raise their hands if they believed what I had just read. A few of them became alert, though they looked at me suspiciously as I continued, "This is lies, nonsense. In fact, I think the textbook is racist and an insult to everyone in this room." Everyone woke up and the same student who had asked the teacher about animal life turned to me and asked, "You mean that?" I said I did, and then he interrupted and said, "Well, there's more than that book that's racist around here."

continue with what I'd opened up or close the conversation down and protect the teacher. I decided to continue on and said I didn't know their teacher but that I had run into more than one racist who was teaching and ought to be thrown out by the students and their parents. I added that it was obvious that the textbook was racist, it was there for everyone to read, but wondered how they detected racism in their teachers. The class launched into a serious and sophisticated discussion of the way in which racism manifests itself in their everyday lives at school. And they described the stance they took in order to resist that racism and yet not be thrown out of school. It amounted to nothing less than full-blown and cooperative not-learning. They accepted the failing grades it produced in exchange for the passive defense of their personal and cultural integrity. This was a class of school failures, and perhaps, I believed then and still believe, the repository for the positive leadership and intelligence of their generation.

In rethinking my teaching experience in the light of not-learning, I realize that many youngsters who ask impertinent questions, listen to their teachers in order to contradict them, and do not take homework or tests seriously are practiced not-learners. The quieter not-learners sit sullenly in class daydreaming and shutting out the sound of their teacher's voice. They sometimes fall off their chairs or throw things across the room or resort to other strategies of disruption. Some push things so far that they get put in special classes or thrown out of school. In all of these cases the young

what the teacher is trying to teach. On that level, no failure is possible, since there has been no attempt to learn. It is common to consider such students dumb or psychologically disturbed. Conscious, willed refusal of schooling for political or cultural reasons is not acknowledged as an appropriate response to oppressive education. Since students have no way to legitimately criticize the schooling they are subjected to or the people they are required to learn from, resistance and rebellion are stigmatized. The system's problem becomes the victim's problem.

However, not-learning is a healthy though frequently dysfunctional response to racism, sexism, and other forms of bias. In times of social movements for justice, such refusal is often turned to more positive mass protest and demonstration, and the development of alternative learning situations. For example, during the 1960s in New York, students who maintained their integrity and consciously refused the racist teachings of their segregated schools became leaders in the school boycotts and teachers of reading and African American history in Freedom schools.

Until we learn to distinguish not-learning from failure and respect the truth behind this massive rejection of schooling by students from poor and oppressed communities, it will not be possible to solve the major problems of education in the United States today. Risk-taking is at the heart of teaching well. That means that teachers will have to not-learn the ways of loyalty to the system and to speak out for, as the traditional African-American song goes, the concept that everyone has a right to the tree of life. We must give up looking at resistant students as failures and turn a critical eye towards this wealthy society and the schools that it supports.

No amount of educational research, no development of techniques or materials, no special programs or compensatory services, no restructuring or retraining of teachers will make any fundamental difference until we concede that for many students, the only sane alternative to not-learning is the acknowledgement and direct confrontation of oppression — social, sexual, and economic — both in school and in society. Education built on accepting that hard truth about our society can break through not-learning and lead students and teachers together, not to the solution of problems but to direct intelligent engagement in the struggles that might lead to solutions. □

Herbert Kohl is author of *36 Children* and, most recently, *From Archetype to Zeitgeist*. This essay is dedicated to the memory of Betty Rawls and the continuing struggle for justice. This essay is excerpted from the booklet, *I Won't Learn from You*, published by Milkweed Editions, Minneapolis, MN, 1991.



Credit: Rick Reinhard

Willed not-learning is different from failure.

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