

Coffee Talk

Negotiating/Disrupting the Hidden Curriculum of Graduate School

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The curtain is closed and the lights are dimmed. A female narrator's voice begins to speak...

THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM within public schools has been connected to values, dispositions, and social and behavioral expectations that are rewarded and expected to be learned and adopted by students (Jackson, 1968). Additional work on the hidden curriculum has directly connected the expectations to maintaining race, class, and gender stratification within society (Apple, 1982; Anyon, 1980). Considerable work has focused upon the hidden curriculum within public K–12 schools; yet, little work has looked at the hidden curriculum within graduate education programs. What are the values, dispositions, and social and behavioral expectations of graduate school and the consequences of those expectations? What can graduate students, particularly those with marginalized cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977), do to understand, negotiate, and resist the hidden curriculum of graduate school?

The curtain opens and four women walk onto the stage, each standing alone in four different corners.

Amy: “More than twice as many men as women work as full-time college and university faculty, and 50 percent more men than women hold leadership positions as campus executives, administrators, and managers” (Neumann & Peterson, 1997, p. 5).

- Syd:** “Women remain in the minority in the senior leadership of the professoriate, representing only 15 percent of full professors nationally. Within the academy, women have been more likely to hold temporary, part-time, and untenured positions and to work at less prestigious institutions....Thus, even in education, where women have predominated as workers, positions of intellectual power and status have traditionally been beyond their reach. With few exceptions, these positions remain so even now.” (Neumann & Peterson, 1997, p. 5). This was the educational context from which we came and was likely to be the one we entered as faculty.
- Beth:** Our graduate program was meant to be interdisciplinary. It was supposed to be about change, reform, policy, and cultural/social foundations. Eleven of us came from all over the country. We were a diverse group with different ethnicities, genders, sexualities, racial backgrounds, first Languages, and experiences.
- Lan:** Some of us came fresh out of the classroom as teachers while others of us had never stepped into a K–12 classroom as educators. We all came wanting change in education but having very different ideas as to what that change should look like. We seemed to talk *at* each other rather than *with* each other. There were tears, tempers, and frustration.
- Syd:** And there were particular values, dispositions, and social and behavioral expectations that were valued over others.
- Amy:** This performance is specifically about our experiences trying to negotiate the hidden curriculum in our graduate program. By developing community with one another we were better able to negotiate/disrupt the hidden and explicit curriculum particularly as it applied to us as women. We acknowledge that our identities also include diverse intersections of oppression and privilege, which influenced our experiences in the graduate program as well.

The Narrator’s voice echoes across the stage in a sing-song tone: “What’s so important about a coffee group? Aren’t you just being silly, little women taking time to gossip once a week?”

- Amy:** When interviewed by Gair and Mullins (2001) as part of a study to define the hidden curriculum, Michael Apple offered the following: “The hidden curriculum is one way of talking about the way in which cultural struggles and policies—people’s lives—are conditioned by an institution...” (p. 25). Apple went on to say: “At universities the hidden curriculum must be brought to an overt level, it must be thought about, it must be talked through....All of that should be brought to a level where people can participate in it, struggle over it, talk about it...” (p. 37).
- Syd:** “I have come to understand the significance of learning through interaction with others. I have observed how empowerment occurs through collective sharing and reflection.” (Delgado-Gaitan, 1997, p. 45).
- Lan:** “Borders between women’s personal and work life are blurred when we learn the influence of one in the other. When we share our stories with each other we learn that the borders we created to differentiate between ‘us’ and ‘the other’ become not a barrier but a zone in which we are all neither/nor. Borderlands offer endless possibilities for being and acting” (Delgado-Gaitan, 1997, p. 45).

Scene 1: Setting the Stage

Amy: So imagine yourself back in a graduate classroom after...

Beth: Two,

Lan: three,

Syd: seven,

Amy: three years away. Years devoted to...

Beth: working in a university psychology department...

Lan: teaching elementary students in a highly diverse, urban school...

Syd: teaching kindergarten and first grade students in a classroom next to your best friend and teaching partner...

Amy: leaving a job in student affairs to care for my mother after my father's death. Talking the talk of classrooms, laboratories, and student affairs. And now remember your first weeks of doctoral study. Was this a seamless transition? We doubt it.

ALL: The interrogation begins.

(The women turn and look at each other while still standing.)

Beth: The interrogation began in the first five minutes of conversation with someone new and continued to be pervasive throughout this journey.

(Rapid fire questions at each other in a mocking tone)

Amy: Where are you from?

Beth: Where did you go to school?

Lan: What are your research interests?

Amy: What are your areas of expertise?

Syd: Who is your chair?

Beth: What is your dissertation topic?

Lan: What kind of job do you want?

Beth: Do you want to be at a research one institute?

Syd: Have you published anything yet?

ALL: What did you just say?

The women sit down at a table in the middle of the stage but turn facing outwards, away from each other.

Beth: I was hearing all kinds of new terminology and I was determined that no one else would know that I had no clue what people were talking about. I smiled a lot, nodded my head, listened carefully, laughed at jokes I didn't understand, and tried to convince myself and everyone else that...

Beth and Lan: I "belonged" in graduate school.

Lan: The different types of knowledge we had were either praised or devalued. Those who did not have the knowledge to participate in academic discussions were silenced by the...

Amy and Lan: voices of those students who did.

Amy: I remember a lot of positioning going on during this first year. Those who spoke in class were familiar with the "discourse" of academia...

Amy and Syd: especially the discourse befitting our program.

Syd: I felt like the rest of my cohort was much more prepared for the work of a Ph.D. student. Feeling tongue-tied and behind in the knowledge I was "supposed" to have, I spent energy...

Syd and Lan: covering my lack of confidence with silence.

Lan: My entire first year, I sat quiet, trying to catch up. I did not know the authors some of the students spoke of. I was not familiar with the jargon of the field. I did not understand a lot of what was being exchanged in class.

ALL: Is anybody listening to me?

Beth: I entered my new graduate program with a chip on my shoulder. I had been silenced in the graduate program I had just left and I was not about to...

Beth and Lan: let myself get silenced again.

Lan: I felt there was nothing I could say that someone else, anyone else couldn't say better. I tried to find breaks in the conversation to interject my voice but found myself too late, too quiet, too unimportant. I struggled to make what was being discussed...

Lan and Syd: relevant to my own life.

Syd: I spent time struggling to connect our readings and our class discussions to my own experience in classrooms. By the time my hesitantly voiced thoughts passed my lips, they...

Syd and Amy: sounded trite and simple.

Amy: I remember having some conversations with Lan, remarking on our lack of courage to “speak up” in class and our frustration with those who seemed to “speak out” all the time.

ALL: I shouldn't be here!

Beth: I avoided close personal relationships with people. I worried they would find out that I wasn't really graduate school material. Maybe if I had gotten to know people outside of the classroom, I would have realized I wasn't the only one who felt like...

Beth and Amy: I was in over my head.

Amy: Friendships and alliances were formed and disrupted, insecurities were experienced, and progress was made (or not!)... induction—and the crises of confidence—had begun.

ALL: Shhh!

Lan: I entered a doctoral program in order to make a bigger difference in the lives of the children and families in which I worked. I needed the power of the Ph.D. to let my voice be heard. However, I did not anticipate...

Lan and Beth: how silencing the process would be.

Beth: I came in with a very positivistic framework, although I didn't realize it at the time. I placed a higher value on knowledge based on “research” over personal experience. I was close-minded and frustrated with people wanting to “always talk about their personal experiences.” I had been socialized well within the field of psychology to believe that...

Beth and Lan: personal experience was invalid and problematic.

Lan: I thought that I would be able to share my experiences as a former teacher in class discussion as a way of talking about how to change education. Instead, I learned that no one wanted to hear about the injustices I had witnessed in schools. No one wanted to hear about the students, the families, and the...

Lan and Syd: teachers whose voices were silenced by those in positions of power.

Syd: No one wanted to hear about my students.

Scene 2: Creating Distance

Syd: I shut myself off from the people in my cohort—spending time with a new niece and nephew, visiting with friends outside of school, and getting married. I missed the immediate importance of working with young children. I played the part of the classroom teacher, the humorous, friendly woman, the new wife. Inside, I just wanted to be alone. I felt confused and isolated, never feeling particularly good at anything anymore. *Walks back to her original corner.*

- Beth:** I carefully constructed a facade that “Everything is fine.” I began to withdraw emotionally and, eventually, physically by avoiding interacting with people on campus. I didn’t feel safe—that I could let my guard down and just be me. *Walks back to her original corner.*
- Amy:** I was excited to begin coursework outside the School of Education beginning in year two: “Fictions of Gender,” and “New Forms of Pedagogy, New Forms of Writing,” for example. I didn’t realize, however, how much this coursework would stretch already tenuous connections with cohort members. At the same time, Paw Paw’s illness and subsequent death meant I was keeping the road between Carr City and Greenam hot several times a week. Relationships suffered... coursework suffered... program of studies and comps avoided... Projecting an image of competence is important to me, so I couldn’t let on that I was busy at work, reinforcing the wall of fear that all too often has stood between me and where I want to go: feeling vulnerable, numb, lacking confidence, alone. *Walks back to her original corner.*
- Lan:** I wonder if the others know how insecure I feel being around them. I don’t feel like I belong in this group. Everyone seems to know so much more than I do. Am I smart enough to be here? How did I get in? It’s only my first year and I already feel so behind. I will stay quiet in class, so no one can criticize what I say. Everyone is so focused, so articulate, and soooo competitive. I feel lucky to be married—otherwise I would feel completely alone. I guess I need to just worry about getting my work done and not about making friends. *Walks back to her original corner.*
- ALL:** Isolation.

Scene 3: Coming together

Syd and Lan walk forward to meet each other.

- Lan:** I ran into Syd one day at the end of the summer before our fourth year. We spent a few moments catching up. I asked her if she wanted to take a one-hour dissertation writing course with me.
- Syd:** With a renewed personal commitment and energy to try and finish my degree, I agreed.
- Lan:** The course ended up being a waste of time.
- Syd:** We would talk after class and walk together to get lunch or arrange to meet for coffee. *Syd and Lan walk to the table and sit down across from each other.*
- Lan:** It was the one day I knew I could connect with a person. Sometimes I would spend eight hours in the library while not having talked to another person all day.
- Syd:** We decided we wanted to have a weekly time to get together, have coffee and some social time.
- Lan:** We asked Amy to join us.
- Lan and Syd wave to Amy from the table while motioning for her to come join them.*
- Amy:** Early on, I felt something of a “guest” in the group, invited by Lan and Syd but reluctant to offer much direction.
- Syd:** Many of our first coffee sessions were spent regaling you (*Amy*) with stories from our class as we made fun of our instructor.
- Amy:** This affected celebration of others’ work became a running gag in the early days of the group as we celebrated each other and our accomplishments no matter how small.
- Syd walks over towards Beth as Amy speaks.*

Beth: (*steps forward*) The two years preceding the “coffee group” had involved a lot of changes for me. I lost touch with some of my closest friends due to becoming a new mother.

Syd: I used to stop by the office where Beth worked or she would come by my office and we would chat. A couple of times I watched her daughter for her when she was in a meeting. I enjoyed talking to her about motherhood and shared things I had learned from conversations with my sister and my best friend, both new mothers themselves.

Beth: In my conversations with Syd, I always found that connection I was missing. I can’t remember exactly what the conversation involved, but I remember Syd casually asking me if I would like to join Lan, Amy, and her for coffee.

Syd and Beth walk over to the table and sit down.

ALL: The personal revealed, walls come down...

Syd: Our time together felt like an oasis from some of the difficulties of our lives outside of the coffee shop. As we began to share more of our personal lives and discovered we were in a space of care and confidentiality, we were willing to become increasingly vulnerable. I remember we began to ask each other to create a group that would respond to each other’s work.

ALL: Sexism and patriarchy aren’t valid issues that need to be addressed nor is it necessary for students to be “sanctioned” for making sexist comments in class or towards other women.

Beth: This was partly communicated as issues of gender were fairly absent from our school of education curriculum. I remember two class periods, not courses, *periods* that focused on gender inequality and feminism. During both classes, I spoke up for women’s rights, and each time, men not only dismissed my comments but actually even laughed at them. Class discussions on gender were typically dominated by the men in our cohort.

Syd: As I reflect on the experiences of the women in our group and on how HARD this process is, I can’t help but think of the people I’ve known who make it look easy. Actually not so much *people* as men. They never seemed to struggle like I struggle, or at least, they rarely talked about it with me.

Beth: Remember the semester after my daughter was born and how I started co-teaching a class with my advisor? The first four weeks of class, I needed to bring her with me while my husband got his work schedule rearranged. I talked about my situation with the students and I thought everyone was okay with her being there. Apparently, I was wrong.

Amy: I remember that. Didn’t they go talk to the associate dean?

Syd: And wasn’t it a woman?

Beth: Yes, when I learned that she had gone over our heads, not saying anything to me or the professor with whom I was co-teaching the class, I was so upset! There was only one more class period that my daughter would have been present, and the professor and associate dean assured me that they would stand behind me whatever I decided to do. A part of me wanted to fight it and another part didn’t want to walk in that classroom again, knowing that my daughter wasn’t welcome. I went in one more time and explained my reason for leaving to the class.

Amy: How did the class respond?

Beth: I found out one student in the class had recently found out she was pregnant when all of this happened. She was having mixed emotions and hadn’t told anyone yet. I can imagine the impact my leaving had on her.

Amy: What’s interesting to me is the fact that the men in the program seem to progress at a faster rate than the women and I wonder what causes this? I don’t believe it’s a difference

in intelligence. It might be a difference in direction/motivation. I believe faculty support plays an important role, and I wonder if different degrees of faculty and peer support are necessary for women to advance. I wonder about the care-taking responsibilities of women and the role these responsibilities play in decelerating our process.

ALL: Our balance restored, we turn to academics.

Lan: Personal talk flowed into academic discourse and back. Our conversations became fluid and spontaneous. My talk about my dissertation would remind you of a funny story or a moment you wanted to share with us.

Beth: I think the biggest thing is that in the space we created it was ok to blend our “work” with our personal experiences. It was understood that talking through struggles we had with our families was just as important as finishing our dissertations—as reading each other’s drafts. We didn’t have to say it out loud.

Amy: I was elated at being a part of this group for both academic and personal reasons. I felt like we were disrupting BOTH the academic and personal isolation we’d grown into. Of course, our collective euphoria, meant that we could and did readily devolve from the academics to the personal.

Syd: We tried to keep each other on track by sharing our goals for the next week and what we would bring for the group to read and respond to. Our meetings started with sharing personal stories and socializing but then would turn to reading, writing comments on, and discussing each other’s work. I don’t suppose we ever established an official agenda, but we would discuss with each other how the group was working.

Beth: It was a haven in contrast to many faculty who only wanted to connect on an academic level and to graduate classes where it did not feel safe to include our personal lives. It was understood that the two really couldn’t be disconnected—no line existed for us.

Amy: It really wasn’t until participating in this group that I gained a behind-the-scenes look at how my friends worked, and I was sad that the norm prevented being vulnerable in academic contexts.

Scene 4: The Hidden Uncovered

The women all stand and form a line in the front of the stage facing the audience while holding hands.

ALL: This group works because...

BETH: We recognize when we need to restore the balance between our academic lives and our personal lives.

ALL: This group has been successful because...

Syd: One of the challenges our group explicitly discusses is that of gender. We’re all women and that shapes both our experience and our response. Yet as a group of mostly white women, we recognize that we enter and leave school with more social and cultural capital than women of color.

Lan: We’re not, however, as explicit about issues of race, ethnicity, and sexuality. We also avoid certain power dynamics that exist between students and faculty.

Amy: Our question and challenge to you and to ourselves is how can we do a better job of welcoming new students into the community of graduate education? How can we create safer spaces and make the hidden more transparent? Additionally, what structures or systems can we put in place to prevent successive cohorts of students from experiencing the

same sorts of disequilibrium? Are these natural and necessary processes? We don't think so. And as we confront the end of our student careers and hope to begin professions in academia, we want to know what we can do to facilitate better experiences for graduate students so that the hidden curriculum of graduate education isn't so hidden.

The curtain closes.

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