

## CHAPTER 10

# Pedagogic Fixation

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### Introduction

The following chapter was originally published in the book *Disruptive fixation: school reform and the pitfalls of techno-idealism* (© Princeton University Press, 2017).

At the book's core is an in-depth ethnographic case study of an ambitious New York City reform project that aimed to reinvent the American public school for the digital age. One of the main arguments of the book is that idealistic educational reform initiatives based in technologically centred formulations tend to move through cycles of 'disruptive fixation' that consolidate, rather than dismantle, inherited patterns and inequities. The cyclical process tends to begin when powerful people who are not typically educational experts—policymakers, philanthropists, pundits, journalists and so forth—call for and sometimes offer to support technologically cutting-edge education reform. In doing so, these powerful outsiders typically diagnose existing educational systems as broken and outmoded as they reaffirm more widely held social, political and moral yearnings about the role of education in a liberal-democratic society.

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#### How to cite this book chapter:

Sims, C. (2020). Pedagogic fixation. In M. Stocchetti (Ed.), *The digital age and its discontents: Critical reflections in education* (pp. 183–210). Helsinki: Helsinki University Press. <https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-4-10>  
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In the next stage of the cycle, technological and educational experts respond to these calls for 'disruption' by designing and proposing what they see as path-breaking educational reforms. These experts do so in large part because they need to secure support from these more powerful outsiders in order to sustain and build their careers and in order to enact their expertise. To design cutting-edge educational reforms, experts engage in two interrelated processes that the anthropologist Tania Murray Li (2007) has called *problematization* and *rendering technical*. *Problematization* refers to the particular ways in which experts render the people and worlds into which they plan to intervene as broken and, thus, in need of fixing or improvement. *Rendering technical* refers to how experts figure those persons and worlds as intelligible with, amenable to and governable with the new tools and techniques that the experts have on hand or are in the process of developing.

Together, the process of *problematization* and *rendering technical* allow experts to convince themselves and many potential supporters that their planned intervention is potentially transformative in beneficent, unprecedented and significant ways. However, processes of *problematization* and *rendering technical* also have the effect of occluding much of what cannot be measured and manipulated with the tools that experts have on hand, including, importantly, political-economic structures and entrenched relations of power. As such, when a 'disruptive' philanthropic intervention is launched, it quickly faces many destabilizing factors and forces that were excluded during processes of *problematization* and *rendering technical*. In response to these unanticipated forces, the people charged with executing a reform initiative quickly search for stabilizing resources, many of which come from canonical versions of the institutions that reformers hope to disrupt and some of which come from elites in the worlds targeted for intervention. While these stabilizing resources allow reformers to avoid an embarrassing collapse of their intervention, they also tend to have the effect of remaking many of the institutional patterns and inequities that reformers had *problematized* and hoped to dismantle.

The following chapter, *Pedagogic Fixations*, examines this cyclical process as it pertained to the school reformers' attempts to develop a 'game-like' pedagogy that was designed for the presumed needs of a 21st-century workforce and citizenry. In addition to illustrating how a disruptive philanthropic intervention often reproduces many of the problems that reformers aim to remedy, the chapter also begins to investigate how many people who commit themselves to such initiatives often manage to maintain optimism for their experiment. A key component in this ideological work is what I refer to as *sanctioned counter-practices*: moments when an intervention more or less resembles its idealized formulations. As the chapter shows, *sanctioned counter-practices* play a relatively minor role in the day-to-day routines of an intervention, yet they play an outsized role in how reformers represent a project to themselves and to influential outsiders, such as journalists, parents, city officials and officers from funding agencies. The chapter argues that these ritualized celebrations of *sanctioned counter-practices* are not so much attempts to manipulate outsiders' opinions

as they are occasions when both insiders and outsiders can collectively affirm their commitment to a novel moral enterprise.

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About a week after the Downtown School opened, I was sitting with students in a class that focused on science. The class began much like a traditional middle-school science class. The teacher, Cameron, controlled a PowerPoint presentation from the front of the room, and the students and I sat quietly on stools around elevated tables with slate tops and sinks in the middle. Cameron explained, 'We are going to go over some classroom procedures that are boring and not fun.' The procedures included step-by-step scripts for how we were supposed to enter and exit the classroom. He also explained that each table was a group and that each member of the group would have a job. In response, a few students asked questions such as, 'Will we get a paycheck?' and 'Can we get fired?' Cameron did not answer these questions, but instead clapped his hands in a pattern that the students had learned to repeat back. The room quieted and Cameron continued listing the jobs. The first two jobs were Paper Collectors, to which one of the students at my table whispered to the rest of us, 'One, two, three, not it.' The next job was called Material Master and the final job was called Clock Watcher. The students at my table debated who would be the Material Master—nobody wanted to be the Clock Watcher or the Paper Collectors—and eventually a coin toss by Cameron settled the issue. After jobs were assigned, Cameron showed a slide with a picture of Isaac Newton and asked students if they knew the person in the image. At this point, I noticed one of the school's designers, the principal, and another adult—who I later learned was a reporter—quietly enter the back of the room. Cameron told us that while we all knew about YouTube, we probably did not know that there was also a website called TeacherTube. Cameron then started a video clip entitled 'Newton's First Law', which opened with a shot of dominoes knocking each other over in a chain reaction. At first, the video looked like a typical instructional video, except that glitches occasionally disrupted the image and the sound seemed muddled and distorted. Suddenly, odd-looking sock-puppet characters—which I later learned had been appropriated from the popular video game *Little Big Planet 2*—bounced across the screen while making unintelligible squeals. The students looked as perplexed as I was. Cameron stopped the video, said, 'That's weird', and then fussed with his computer. As he did so, he casually shared that perhaps an e-mail he had received that morning could help us figure out what was going on. Cameron projected the email onto the Smart Board at the front of the classroom, and we read that there was a hidden package in the back of the classroom.

Everyone was looking at Cameron, their backs erect, and a few even stood on their feet. One student called out, 'Why are you doing this?' Cameron did not answer the student, but instead told the class that he was going to form a search party to look for the hidden package. He asked for volunteers, and nearly all the students' hands went up. The four students that Cameron chose for the

search party quickly scrambled to the back of the room and scoured the tables, chairs and cubbies. Soon, one of these students found a large manila envelope that had been taped under a table. Cameron asked the student to bring him the envelope, from which he retrieved a letter that was adorned with pictures of the sock-puppet characters that we had seen in the video. According to the letter, these characters needed our help because their houses kept falling down. According to Cameron, the students would spend the rest of the trimester trying to help the sock-puppet characters learn how to build better houses. To do so, we would have to learn about physics.

At the back of the room, the designer, principal and reporter smiled and whispered among themselves before leaving. Cameron quieted the class and then asked several students to pass out a worksheet that had also been included in the package from the sock-puppet characters. The worksheet asked us to make identification badges, and Cameron told us that if we did not finish our badges during class time, then we could finish them at home. The next time the class met, Cameron passed out a second worksheet, also purportedly from the sock puppets. This one asked the students to look at a technical diagram and answer questions such as, ‘What information can be gathered from the picture?’ Cameron told us we had eight minutes to do the worksheet and that if we did not finish, it would be homework. He projected a countdown timer onto the Smart Board and we got to work.

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Tracing the processes by which yearnings for philanthropic disruption are translated into interventions that paradoxically tend to help remake and extend existing institutional arrangements and power relations, examined how reformers’ spatial fixations largely exclude the ways in which the production of space is always part of more extensive political processes that reformers cannot control. These oversights were made visible once the production and connection of learning environments was viewed not only from the perspective of reformers and designers, but also from the perspective of parents and caregivers. This chapter examines how similar tunnel vision is entailed in reformers’ pedagogic fixations. Like spatial fixations, pedagogic fixations occur through processes of problematization and rendering technical, but pedagogic fixations focus on changing persons rather than on spaces per se. Pedagogic fixations help reformers act, think and feel *as if* the activities they are imagining and designing for others are both novel and in the best interest of their recipients. Philanthropic interventions that aim to transform and improve a target population often entail these pedagogic fixations, and yet, as we will see, these fixations are also remarkably fragile and hence have to be repeatedly repaired in practice in order to survive.

While pedagogic fixations help reformers and their backers act as if they are participating in a project that is innovative and beneficial for the target population, factors and forces excluded by these fixations create countless unanticipated problems for reformers as soon as their intervention is launched. Once

an intervention is set down in the world, these unanticipated forces overflow the project and destabilize reformers' carefully designed activities, so much so that reformers can even worry that their project will collapse. In theory, these moments of instability are opportunities when reformers can re-examine their pedagogic fixations, and to some extent they do. But the dominant tendency is not so much to question the fixations that arose during processes of problematization and rendering technical as to engage in a different sort of fixation: reformers quickly reach for stabilizing resources wherever they can. Ironically, many of the resources that are ready-to-hand come from canonical practices in the figured worlds that reformers aim to disrupt (DiMaggio & Powell 1983). As such, attempts to disrupt the status quo in open and improvisational ways can have the paradoxical consequence of re-fixing activity into rather enduring and tightly scripted forms.

Curiously, many of the people who committed themselves to the Downtown School mostly maintained their pedagogic fixations throughout these processes, particularly their sense that the school's pedagogic activities were both unconventional and philanthropic. From a social practice theory perspective (Holland & Lave 2001), the endurance of these pedagogic fixations cannot be reduced to dogmatism or simplistic notions of ideology. Rather, we must look for how these fixations are maintained and repaired in practice, in part through what the ethnographer Amanda Lashaw (2008) has characterized as 'the ample production of hope'. Ironically, it is partly through this ongoing revitalization of optimism that reformers often end up helping to remake and extend that which they hope to disrupt.

### Designing Beneficial Experiences

As discussed previously, the Downtown School's most distinctive innovation was to try to redesign the pedagogic activities of schooling as if they were an engaging and beneficent game. Like the reformers' spatial fixations, this pedagogic fixation partially arose through processes that problematized not only conventional schooling, but also modernist state institutions more generally. Like many other social reformers who have been inspired by the seemingly dynamic organizations and work cultures of Silicon Valley, the designers and backers of the Downtown School problematized reformers of the past for creating organizations that were hierarchical, rigidly scripted and, hence, controlling. These previous attempts at social and organizational engineering were seen as inhibiting, rather than enhancing, the capacities of the people who worked in bureaucratic organizations, as well as the people those organizations claimed to serve. By contrast, games appeared to offer an inspiring alternative model for how experts and managers could design and organize experiences for others. Game design, and experience design more generally, appeared to offer a way for experts and managers to craft activities that were organized and goal-driven, but also flexible, improvisational, creative and even fun. Most importantly, doing so would allow

experts to redesign activities that benefited people in ways that more Tayloristic approaches to organizing activity did not. Games and experience design, proponents argued, would help unleash people's inherent creative capacities and would thus amplify innovation, learning and personal satisfaction.

Of particular interest to the reformers who designed the Downtown School was the work of the sociolinguist James Paul Gee, who had written an influential book on the educational potential of video games (2003). Gee had also received large grants from one of the philanthropic foundations that was sponsoring the Downtown School, and he served as an advisor on the project. By turning pedagogic activities into a game, the school's designers hoped to overcome conventional schooling's emphasis on tightly scripted and obedient behavior, as well as its related reliance on surveillance and coercive disciplinary techniques, which, as we know from Foucault (1977), are not features unique to schools. According to Gee and the school's founders, well-designed games would allow students to actively and creatively explore a 'problem space' that became incrementally more difficult as the players progressed and their skills developed. Moreover, these games would provide students with a context for their activity and, thus, with resources for constructing personal meanings and emotional investments in their school-based activities. By taking on the identity of the game's characters, students would not only be motivated to participate in schooling, but they would also produce beneficial personal transformations, conceptualized as learning, as they did so.

The vignette at the opening of this chapter begins to illustrate how the Downtown School's designers tried to implement this hopeful vision of pedagogic activity. Near the beginning of a trimester, the teacher in each course would introduce a 'mission' for that course. These episodes, which typically lasted for 20 to 30 minutes, were meant to introduce students to the designed game world that would frame the students' schoolwork in that course for the trimester. The designed game worlds would consist of characters that did not belong to the school and who needed the students' help. For example, the sock puppets described in the vignette at the opening of this chapter needed the students' help so that their houses would stop falling down. In another class, a set of fictional characters needed the students' help decoding messages in order to solve a mystery about a missing character. In still another class, professional editors at the transnational media conglomerate Pearson supposedly needed students' help designing educational comics and so on. Guided by teachers, students would interact with these non-school characters through Skype phone calls, video chats, recorded videos, blogs, e-mails, physical letters and other telecommunications. In practice, these episodes were a noticeable break from conventional classroom activities and, as evinced in the opening vignette, many students did appear to be alert and engaged when they occurred, much as the reformers had hoped.

But when considered in terms of the school's everyday routines, a very different picture of the school's pedagogic practices begins to emerge. Most

noticeably, these unconventional and less-scripted moments were rather fleeting and negligible compared to the abundance of conventional, highly scripted schooling activities. After brief episodes in which students communicated with characters from the designed game worlds, daily life would quickly return to familiar school routines in which managers, here teachers, issued subordinates a near constant succession of fine-grained commands. In the vignette just described, the sock puppets assigned the students paper worksheets that could be completed as homework if they did not finish them in class. In the school's math class, which had been framed as a code-breaking academy, one of the students' first challenges was to take a paper and pencil test on fractions. In class after class, a common pattern emerged: after an unconventional and improvisational exchange with characters from the designed game worlds, educators returned to conventional schooling practices with familiar power relations and adult-scripted activities, but these schooling practices had been relabeled as if they were part of the game.

Consider, for example, how the school's designers attempted to transform the familiar disciplinary practices of hierarchical observation, normalizing judgments and examinations (Foucault 1977). According to the school's designers, their goal was to help all students become masters in the school's various knowledge domains. Much like a video game, students would get feedback rather than grades, and progress would be measured in terms of moving through various stages and levels in the game. Moreover, this feedback would supposedly come from within the designed game worlds. Instead of teachers assessing students, characters in the designed game worlds would supposedly evaluate students' work. The above-mentioned paper-and-pencil test for the code-breaking academy is an example of this sort of symbolic transformation of a familiar disciplinary technique. The teacher presented the test as if it were an entrance exam to the code-breaking academy, but it was also a formative assessment for the school's educators. Moreover, the feedback students received on their various assignments did not use letter grades or points out of 100, as is done in conventional schools, but it was still organized on a linear scale with five ranked categories—master, senior, apprentice, novice and pre-novice—each of which also had the equivalent of pluses and minuses—Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3. The labels had changed, but the underlying practices had not. The school's designers envisioned a similar transformation in how they organized the curriculum. All students were required to take the same five courses, and they had little say over what they were expected to learn in each course. While the reformers referred to these courses as *domains* and assigned imaginative new labels to each one, the content of these courses was defined mostly by state standards and to a lesser degree the school's designers and educators. One course covered New York State's standards for sixth-grade science education, another class focused on the state standards for math education, another combined social studies and English and language arts, and another course blended physical fitness with what educators referred to as 'socioemotional learning'. The school's most

unconventional course focused entirely on media production, which in the school's first year consisted of game design. The reformers also tried to incorporate what they referred to as '21st-century literacies' within these domains, which in the school's first year consisted of teamwork, systems thinking and time management. Each domain was supposed to focus on these literacies, as well as the state-mandated content. In any case, students had no voice in shaping the curriculum, despite reformers' claims to be student-centred.

Spatial and temporal routines also mostly resembled conventional schooling practices; if anything, they were even more tightly scripted by adults than I recalled from my own experiences in public middle school. Students were expected to be within the physical boundaries of the school from 08:30 in the morning until 15:30 in the afternoon. During this time, adults required students to participate in a nearly continuous succession of tasks that educators defined and oversaw. A standardized schedule coordinated the movement of classes between rooms and the transfer of authority between adults at nine points during the day. Thirty minutes at the beginning of each day was scheduled for a school-wide assembly, called Morning Meeting, and a follow-on 10- to 15-minute advisory period. There were then four 50-minute academic periods, followed by 45 minutes that was split between lunch and recess, followed by two more 50-minute academic periods, before ending the day with a 15-minute advisory session. Throughout the week, individual classes would oscillate between 50 and 100 minutes, taking up one or two scheduled periods. Within each of these time blocks, teachers directed students to work on scripted tasks that typically lasted 20 minutes or less, and many of these scripted activities were broken down into successive step-by-step procedures that resembled algorithms.

Typical pedagogic activities consisted of small projects, mini lessons and short assignments. Projects were the least adult-scripted activities and yet adults had a heavy hand in managing these activities as well. Students usually worked on a project in increments of 30 minutes or less over several class periods. Educators defined project goals and often the roles of teammates. In many cases, teachers also assigned students to different roles, provided directives on how to reach those goals and assessed the quality of students' work. Mini lessons, which were a daily routine in most classes, followed the familiar lecture format. Teachers provided information and modeled phenomena as students took notes and sometimes asked questions. Mini lessons were typically shorter than projects. Many were approximately 10 minutes in length, and in longer periods teachers would sometimes do more than one mini lesson per class. Assignments tended to be highly scripted information-seeking tasks or problem-set exercises. For information-seeking assignments, teachers typically provided students with a book, a photocopied packet (usually copied from a textbook) or a specific website. Students would then answer questions by extracting information from the designated source and transferring it, often with minimal interpretation or translation, to a preformatted answer document. Sometimes students would answer these questions on paper handouts and sometimes they would use the

school's laptops to answer questions in a Google Doc that was accessible to the teacher. When using the Internet, the teacher would define which website and even which webpage the students should access, and students would be reprimanded for leaving the specified webpage. Problem sets mostly resembled standardized tests and were primarily used in the math-themed class. These, too, tended to be relatively brief, with most lasting 20 minutes or less.

This sketch of the quotidian pedagogic activities at the Downtown School shows a puzzling discrepancy between the reformers' vision of unprecedented creativity and fun and the striking conventionality of daily life in the school, a conventionality that educational historians David Tyack and Larry Cuban (1995) referred to as the 'grammar of schooling'. While the reformers championed student agency and creativity, students had very little say about what they could do, and most of what they were supposed to do was quite similar to the very schooling practices that reformers criticized and aimed to replace. Most of what reformers had changed was the language used to describe these conventional practices.<sup>1</sup>

Later, we will see how reformers managed to work with and through these seeming contradictions, but, for now, it is important to emphasize two key points that are central to this later analysis. First, forces that reformers could not control often structured the practices that they most overlooked. Just as the reformers tended to downplay their school's entanglement in competitive processes of social selection, so too they tended to overlook and underemphasize the ways in which their entanglement in educational systems structured much of the project's pedagogic activities. Newly available means, as I have been emphasizing, tended to fix reformers' energy and attention on what they could foreseeably control and transform with these new tools. Second, it is worth noting how reformers' optimistic vision of disruption obscured the ways in which those who enacted the project would exercise power over those that they figured as beneficiaries of their philanthropic intervention. If games had especially strong motivational powers and if contemporary youth voluntarily played games for hours on end, then a game-like intervention would seemingly escape the ethically thorny issue of coercing participation. Similarly, if feedback came from fictional game characters, then educators did not appear to be exercising power over students through grading practices and so on. This downplaying of the power relations inherent in pedagogic interventions was an optimistic oversight that left reformers unprepared to deal with people who resisted the reformers' philanthropic offerings, as we will now see.

### Overflowing and Retrofitting

Not long after the school opened, it became evident that the school's game-like pedagogy did not have the motivational powers that the school's designers had hoped. Almost immediately after the school opened, many school leaders,

teachers and parents worried that students were out of control. Some students talked back, made fun of the designed game characters, ignored or played with directives from teachers and generally asserted themselves in ways that made it difficult for teachers to stick to the scripted activities that they, game designers and curriculum designers had jointly crafted. Students were exercising their creativity and agency, but not in the ways in which the school's designers had anticipated or desired. Instead, students were transforming the reformers' carefully designed activities towards their own interests and sensibilities. Here, for example, is a snippet from my field notes not long after the school opened:

We're lined up in the hallway waiting for Sarah [the teacher] to take us to the gym. Before heading up the stairs Sarah reminds us of the procedures we're supposed to follow after we arrive: place our bags and jackets against the wall, run three laps around the perimeter of the gym, then get in a big circle and quietly wait for her instructions.

Sarah goes on to tell us about the main activity for the day. She tells us we're going to split into two lines and play a game with basketballs. Troy shouts out, 'Knockout!' Several other students follow his lead and also shout out 'Knockout.' Sarah ignores them and starts explaining what we're going to do: a student at the front of one line will shoot the basketball, then the person from the front of the other line will rebound the ball and give it to the next person in the shooting line. Each student will then go to the end of the opposite line and the process will repeat.

'That's not Knockout,' Troy says.

Sarah says that this is what we'll be 'playing' today. Troy counters that Knockout is more fun.

Sarah responds by telling Troy, 'When you grow up and become a teacher then you can have everyone play Knockout.' Sarah also reminds the students that gym was part of their grade.

Rake blurts out, 'Who knew so much fun stuff would be part of our grade?'

Sarah tells him to, 'Knock off the attitude.'

A similar dynamic played out in every class: when students tried to question or bend reformers' and educators' scripted activities, educators corrected them and tried to compel their participation in the school's version of fun. Many educators equated student resistance with personal disrespect or with spoiling the fun of the group. For example, when one of the students called out, 'This

is so fake!’ as the teacher showed students a blog message that had supposedly been written by a master game designer, the teacher snapped back, ‘Stop ruining it for everyone!’ Similar tensions played out in all classes, especially at the beginning of the year.

Reformers’ and educators’ concerns about control also extended beyond the pedagogic activities of classrooms. As just mentioned, the school’s designers had allocated 45 minutes for lunch and recess, which they roughly split into two equal time blocks. At the beginning of the year students could more or less do what they liked during recess so long as they hung out in a designated classroom or the gym, both of which were monitored by adults. The students who hung out in the gym produced a heterogeneous assortment of activities that often bled into one another. Students moved around noisily and fluidly, many improvisational games emerged, and participants moved in and out of various activities, changing their own course and the course of the activities in the process. Some students shot basketballs, some played with jump ropes, others did cartwheels, some roamed the perimeter of the gym and others hung out with friends in small groups. Many students moved between activities and social groups and there was no clear overarching plan or structure, perhaps suggesting opportunities for breaking down preconceptions about class, gender and race.

However, some of the school’s designers and educators worried that this arrangement was too chaotic, noisy and out of control. As one of the school’s designers mentioned to me as we watched the students play during recess, ‘[I don’t know if they [the students] can handle this. I could hear them from the street when I went to get lunch.’ These moments of concern evince the dilemmas that contemporary institutional reformers face as they try to reconcile, on the one hand, their aspiration to design activities that promote creativity, agency and transformations towards self-realization among an intervention’s intended beneficiaries and, on the other hand, the more instrumental mandate to control, measure and develop those persons into particular idealized subjects.

While these dilemmas could theoretically be moments in which reformers questioned their assumptions, and particularly the enduring yearning to create apolitical and philanthropic mechanisms for learning, the dominant tendency was to engage in a different sort of fixation: the school’s designers and educators quickly searched for resources that would stabilize the project against the unanticipated turbulence of students’ unsanctioned behaviour. In response to students’ resistance to the adult-scripted activities—all of which evinced the student-centred agency that reformers championed—the school’s designers, leadership and educators quickly attempted to establish the authority of school adults in order to regain control of students and hence their project. Ironically, they mostly did so by retrofitting the project with the very techniques of discipline and control that were common at the conventional schools against which they had defined their project and themselves.

In several classrooms, desks were rearranged from inward-facing clusters of five desks—an arrangement which put some students’ backs towards the

teacher, but also allowed for easier peer communications during student-driven project work—into sequential rows that all faced the teacher at the front of the room. Further, educators intensified their efforts to orchestrate a seamless flow of adult-scripted activities, even during moments when students had previously enjoyed some autonomy, such as recess and the brief passing period between classes. Within a week after one of the school's designers expressed concern that students might not be able to handle recess in the gym, educators introduced adult-scripted activities for recess in the gym. Half the gym was organized into a football game administered by one of the educators. In the other half of the gym, students were allowed to organize their own smaller games, so long as they remained relatively quiet and spatially contained. Most students who did not play football stopped going to the gym after these changes, and some social divisions among students, notably gender divisions, became more spatially calcified during recess. During passing periods, which educators saw as moments when they could lose control, teachers introduced a script in which they organized students into quiet, forward-facing, single-file lines before they left a classroom. After such a line was formed—which could take some time—teachers marched students down the hallway to their next class, where they then waited quietly against a wall until the next teacher allowed them to enter. All teachers introduced this script at the same time, about a month into the school year. Further, in the middle of the fall, all the educators established a pedagogic script where they directed students to begin a silent, individual, teacher-defined task for five minutes immediately upon entering a new classroom.

In addition to extending practices of surveillance and control to spaces and periods where students had previously experienced some autonomy, educators also intensified their grip in domains where they had already been exerting their authority, albeit in the obscured ways discussed in the past section. In classrooms, educators not only continued to define and enforce scripted activities for students, but in a Tayloristic fashion instructors started breaking down these scripts into ever-smaller step-by-step procedures. In many classes, educators accompanied these fine-grained scripts with techniques intended to facilitate a heightened awareness of 'clock time' (Thompson 1967) among students. While modernist institutions have long emphasized clock time, this orchestration became more fine-grained and explicit than I expected. The reformers referred to their focus on clock time as 21st-century literacy called time management, but time management typically had a lot to do with classroom management, in which students ironically had little say over how they managed their time. Many educators saw clocks and timers as a useful way to keep students on task during scripted activities, as well as when they transitioned between these activities. What educators facilitated was a near-constant awareness among students of how much clock time they had left or had spent on a given task. When directing students to do a scripted activity, educators would almost always tell the students how much time they had for the activity.

Many would use their laptops to project a digital countdown timer for the activity onto the whiteboard at the front of the class, which functioned as a continuous animation of clock time slipping away. Many educators also wore stopwatches around their necks and routinely referred to their stopwatches as they called out how much time was left before the scripted activity ended. Educators expected students to be in their assigned seats and listening for the next directive when a timer ended.

Not only were these references to clock time much more pervasive and evident than I had anticipated, but they somewhat surprisingly had the ‘gamifying’ effect of adding a sense of urgency and competition to what were otherwise rather trivial and boring tasks. The approaching termination of the timer could turn an otherwise boring and scripted activity into a race against the clock, and as timers approached zero you could sense a palpable rise in the energy of the students, an emotional rush that I also felt when I participated in these rote routines.<sup>2</sup> Several teachers even punctuated the end of a countdown timer with the visualization and sound of a large explosion, further adding to a sense of excitement, even though the tasks that we were completing were often quite rote and meaningless. This rush against the clock was sometimes reinforced by a manufactured sense of competition among students and classes. For example, at one point during the year, an educator made a game out of how quickly students could line up quietly before entering his classroom. He taped a large piece of butcher paper on the wall outside his classroom and wrote how many seconds it took for each class to line up quietly before being admitted into the room. This went on for several weeks as classes competed against each other to see which class could be the most disciplined, until the winning class had achieved a time of less than four seconds.

Of course, these processes for creating order and discipline were in glaring contradiction to the reformers’ pedagogic fixations—which purported to cultivate student agency, creativity, improvisational problem-solving capacities and so forth—and yet, seemingly paradoxically, the designers of the school were often complicit in the introduction of these highly scripted practices. What is more, many of these techniques were either replicates, if not enhancements, of the techniques used in the more traditional schools against which the reformers had contradistinguished themselves. In keeping with DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983) notion of ‘mimetic isomorphism’, many of these canonical management techniques were introduced either by reformers and educators who had worked at other schools or by representatives from the Downtown School’s School Support Organization (SSO), the latter of which was meant to replace school boards within New York City’s autonomy for accountability exchange. And the techniques were introduced in a coordinated and standardized fashion across the entire school, often right after the school’s weekly professional development session.<sup>3</sup> Here, for

example, is a portion of an e-mail that one of the school's leaders sent to the school's faculty and staff; in it, the leader explicitly calls on educators to tighten their scripting of students' behaviour:

During [our professional development period] we discussed the importance of the directions we give students. Are directions given both orally and in writing or are they only being delivered orally? Are they broken down into small steps or are there many steps embedded in narrative? Every lesson at The Downtown School thoughtfully considers what students are being asked to do. Please remember to review how you are asking them to do it.

This purposeful import and deployment of canonical disciplinary practices raises the curious question of how reformers managed to reconcile their practices with their ideals. In the words of Bennett Berger (2004), who studied similarly wide gaps between ideals and acts in his study of a group of counter-cultural communards in northern California, such reconciliation requires a lot of ideological work.

### Repairing Idealism

Part of the answer to the question I just posed has to do with the occluding effects of fixations. As I have been arguing, reformers tend to fix their imagination and attention on aspects of the world they can foreseeably transform in morally sanctified ways with their seemingly innovative remedies; correspondingly, they tend to overlook and take for granted whatever they cannot so easily control and transform with these newly available means. As we have seen, the school's designers did not have the power to change many of the factors that structured canonical pedagogic practices. The state and the Department of Education, rather than the school's designers, determined much of the curriculum, as well as funding for student–teacher ratios, the allocation of space and many other resource provisions. The built environments that they inhabited—consisting of multiple similar classrooms, each of which had been designed for a single educator teaching several dozen students—were inherited and built with canonical models of schooling in mind.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the school had to be able to interoperate with other schools in the broader New York City schooling system, as well as with colleges and universities. Part of its mandate involved receiving and delivering students in age-graded cohorts and producing standardized outcome metrics that made students and educators legible, hence differentiable, in processes of social selection and managerial oversight that extended beyond the space of the school. Reformers and educators had to comport themselves to these more entrenched strictures, and they deliberated how to do so, but reformers, in particular, did not tend to see such practices as central to what their project was all about.

How so?

For one, despite their professed student-centred ethos, more widespread and deeply sedimented ideological edifices about age relations and developmental temporalities helped reformers and educators downplay aspects of their pedagogic practices that were particularly at odds with their ideals. As sociologists of childhood and youth have documented, modernist practices of disciplining and controlling children and young people are legitimized, and hence often taken for granted, in part because of a more general tendency among adults to infantilize children and young people, a tendency that emerged alongside broader historical changes in the social and cultural organization of age relations (Zelizer 1985; Qvortrup 1994; James, Jenks & Prout 1998; Corsaro 2005). Figuring children as particularly underdeveloped and vulnerable is especially common in figured worlds that take the care and development of children and young people as their *raison d'être*. There were too many of these infantilizing practices to enumerate, but the reformer's previous comment that the students couldn't handle recess in the gym is one such example. Additionally, some educators routinely addressed the students with labels that positioned them as immature and inexperienced because of their age—terms such as boys and girls—and one educator even reminded the students that they were being addressed with these terms because they had not yet proven themselves worthy of a more mature and autonomous status. More commonly, educators routinely subjected students to didactic lessons on topics that students were presumed not to know, but were, in fact, quite knowledgeable about. One such episode was a school-wide assembly in which educators made students perform small skits in which they acted out norms for polite social etiquette, such as how to hold the door open for someone and how to acknowledge the act with the phrase 'thank you'. Students already knew about these normative conventions, even if they sometimes did not enact them, in part, I believe, to demonstrate their autonomy from adult-imposed strictures. As we will see in the next chapter, these sorts of infantilizing practices produce conditions for oppositional behaviour, especially for subordinates who can gain status among their peers by demonstrating resistance to supervisory power.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, experienced reformers and educators routinely made a distinction between practices of control and practices of care, the former of which they classified as classroom management and the latter of which they classified as pedagogical or learning activities. In practice, classroom management and pedagogic practices were one and the same, with purportedly caring pedagogic practices taking forms that helped sustain authorities' control in crowded conditions. Yet, experienced reformers and educators tended to classify management practices as a separate but necessary precondition for administering pedagogic practices, and the latter was widely seen as beneficial for all students and hence as morally caring. For experienced reformers and educators, classroom-management practices seemed to be understood as a necessary, sometimes ugly, but also fairly mundane aspect of being a professional

educator. And, if anything, experienced reformers and educators seemed to see those of us who were newer to their figured worlds—such as reformers who came from the worlds of technology design, as well as myself—as a bit naïve. As I spent more and more time in the school, I often got the sense that learning how to discipline and control students was treated by experienced educators as a sort of *sub rosa* aspect of being an experienced member of their figured world.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, new reformers and educators became more experienced old-timers in part by learning to make the distinction between classroom management and pedagogic practices, as well as by learning how to be comfortable exercising power over young people. Perhaps recalling their own experiences as novice teachers and knowing that I was new to middle school as an adult, several of the experienced educators would make comments to me such as, ‘Teaching is crazy, right?’ after I witnessed an educator deploy a variety of rather domineering disciplinary techniques in an attempt to corral and pacify students. When I agreed, I felt as if I was beginning to be let into their club, in part by treating the exercise of power over young people as a normal, and even skillful, aspect of being an experienced educator.

While less-experienced reformers seemed to share my sense that many of these disciplinary practices were odd, if not unsettling, the division of labour in the philanthropic intervention also made it easier for these reformers to downplay and overlook the extent to which their project involved exercising coercive and disciplinary techniques on those it was designed to help. At the Downtown School, there was a fairly sharp and spatialized division of labour between the people who designed and supported the intervention and those who implemented it. By and large, the school’s design team spent little time managing everyday life at the school, even though they held considerable power over those who did. The founders of the school spent increasingly little time in the school as the project aged, and the practitioners who did spend their days in the school were split between, on the one hand, a group of game designers and curriculum designers who were largely responsible for crafting the school’s innovative pedagogy and, on the other hand, teachers and administrators who enacted the designers’ pedagogic scripts, managed students and were charged with keeping the school running. It was the school’s philanthropic backers, its game and curriculum designers, and its founders who remained the most enthusiastic about the school and its innovative philanthropic potential, and yet they also had comparatively little responsibility for, as well as less exposure to, its quotidian functioning. Additionally, those of us who were newer to educational reform were able to treat canonical practices of discipline and control as respectfully belonging to the world of professional educators. For example, one of the school’s founders, a media technology designer, noted to me that they also found educators’ classroom-management practices curious, but then quickly distanced themselves from the remarkability of such practices by suggesting that they were an oddity of what professional educators do.

Finally, and as noted earlier, the school's isomorphic drift was partially obscured and discounted because many of these familiar features had been recoded with terminology borrowed from technology design, especially game design. This terminology downplayed the ways in which educators not only remade canonical practices, but also controlled others through those practices. All these dynamics help explain how reformers and educators were able to reconcile tensions and contradictions between the project's ideals and its acts. All have the effect of occluding, normalizing, translating and generally downplaying the ways in which the school's pedagogic activities were shot through with the very techniques that reformers aimed to disrupt. Yet, practices that occlude, distort and overlook do not adequately account for how reformers and educators also manage to maintain and repair their sense that a philanthropic intervention is both cutting-edge and morally sanctified. Oversights can help such fixations persist, but they do not provide experiences that renew a collective sense of moral optimism. The maintenance and revitalization of such feelings depend on the collective accomplishment, and ritualized valorization, of what I call sanctioned counter-practices.

### Sanctioned Counter-Practices

At the end of every trimester, the Downtown School's educators thoroughly reconfigured the school's social, spatial and temporal routines. All normal classes were suspended and students were assigned a single challenge to work on with a small team of their peers for the rest of the trimester. For the first trimester, educators challenged teams to build a Rube Goldberg machine out of everyday materials that parents and educators had donated; for the second trimester, students wrote and produced short plays based on fairy tales that they had remixed; at the end of the third quarter, students produced a field day consisting of physical games that they had designed. This was Level Up, a special week-long period that was staged at the end of each trimester.

Level-Up periods were the times during the year when the school's pedagogic practices most closely resembled reformers' pedagogic fixations. They were also the moments that drew most heavily on idealizations of creative and high-tech work practices that have been valorized as a new model of work and citizenship in many parts of the globe (Lindtner 2014; Irani 2015). Socially, educators organized students into groups of eight to ten, each of which had an adult advisor. Adults still defined the overall challenge for each Level Up, but much of the design and building of the projects was left up to the students. In keeping with the school's ideals of a student-centred pedagogy, educators mostly played a supportive, rather than a controlling, role. They waited for students to request their assistance and stepped in only when conflicts between students seemed to be especially tense. The students negotiated with one another about what

they should do next, struggled to implement their decisions, failed to produce expected results, passed judgments (both positive and negative) on one another's ideas and efforts, revised their plans, argued with one another about who should do what and so on.

Students also spent a lot more time talking than they did during a normal school day, and the overall volume in classes was noticeably higher. At one point, a teacher who was running a class on the floor beneath the Downtown School even came upstairs to complain about the noise because his students were taking an exam. The organization of students into teams also broke with the individuating tendency of many of the school's other pedagogic practices. While there were many internal disagreements over the direction of each team's project, each group oriented towards a common production. A common stake and say in the outcome of the project supported these more cordial relations.

Assessment was also more open-ended and distributed during Level Up. At the end of the first Level Up, the school showcased the students' Rube Goldberg machines for parents and an outside panel of judges (mostly professional designers). The judges offered verbal feedback about what they did and did not like about each machine, and they awarded one team a prize for the best machine, but as far as I know, no individual grades were given. Further, students and teachers talked informally about the various projects, but they did so more as partners than in normal routines in which educators were the presumed experts.

In terms of space and equipment, educators reorganized classrooms so that rows of forward-facing desks were broken apart and clustered into workspaces. Educators gave each team one-half of a classroom that they could use as a dedicated workspace for the entire Level-Up period. Educators also provided teams with a hodgepodge of scrap materials, from cardboard tubes to toy cars, PVC pipes, rulers, tape, weights, marbles and so on. Educators allowed students to make a mess and leave their materials and in-process productions in their workspaces throughout Level Up. Unlike normal classes, educators did not confine students to their seats, and many students moved fluidly around the classroom. Temporally, the school day had only a few divisions. Students worked on their projects for hours at a time and educators made few references to the urgency of clock time. At any given moment, some students were off task, but educators generally did not intervene. Some students told their peers to stop wasting time, and sometimes a student asked an educator to direct their peers to participate. In general, though, Level Up felt much less scripted and less rushed than a typical school day.

Some other schooling practices also approximated reformers' pedagogic fixations, albeit not as closely as Level Up. For example, the episodic moments in which classes communicated with characters from designed game worlds were substantively unconventional for a school. Similarly, the requirement that all students take a media arts course focused on game design was somewhat unique. Other unconventional practices included the occasional small projects,

the few times during the trimester when classes used the school's 'semi-immersive embodied learning environment,' and the school's after-school programmes that focused on making, hacking and remixing media and technology.

As shorthand, I refer to these moments when the daily life of a disruptive intervention most closely approximates reformers' philanthropic idealizations as sanctioned counter-practices. The phrase is meant to draw attention to how these activities are indeed different from the more conventional, and bureaucratic, processes that reformers aim to disrupt; they are counter-practices. Yet, they are also deviations that are permitted and valued by people in positions of institutional authority: sanctioned counter-practices.

The project's designers and backers tended to treat these unconventional practices as indicative of what the project was all about, but I found them more of a carnivalesque inversion of disciplined routines and orders.<sup>7</sup> While moments of sanctioned counter-practice were often inspiring, they were also relegated to a few carefully bounded times during the day or school year, reformers and educators were not able to expand them and, if anything, they became less a part of the school's routines as it aged.

Sanctioned counter-practices became less prevalent as the school aged for several reasons. For one, and as already discussed, the school's designers had assumed that their game-like pedagogy would motivate subordinates' voluntary participation in managerially scripted activities. When this did not happen, educators ratcheted up discipline in an attempt to restore managerial authority and enforce compliance. Additionally, privileged parents mapped their anxieties about some of the school's less-privileged students onto assumptions about educator permissiveness, thus pressuring educators towards more adult-controlled models of schooling. Third, the mandate to produce competitive scores in state exams constantly hung over reformers' and educators' heads, and both privileged and less-privileged parents pressured educators to devote more time and attention to preparing students for these exams. These parents did so not necessarily because they saw the state exams as indicative of what their children had learned, but because they saw them as key to their children's mobility in broader educational systems. As one professional parent wrote in an e-mail to other parents and the school's leaders, 'I don't like these tests more than anybody else. I actually pretty much despise them. But these are the rules made by the State. I don't make them. I just follow them.' Many less-privileged parents and caregivers were especially concerned about test scores because their children's access to other middle and high schools were so dependent on these scores. More-privileged families, by contrast, had greater access to various educational alternatives, as well as private tutoring for test preparation, and yet many privileged families also pressured educators to focus more on testing. Further, the market-like choice system was designed to increase competition between schools and, subsequently, between students, largely on the basis of test scores. As such, as the school aged, educators dedicated less time to sanctioned counter-practices and more time to test preparation, especially after the

school's first-year scores fell below those of peer institutions. In the school's second year, educators even dedicated the entire Level-Up period at the end of the second trimester to test preparation.

Against the magnitude of these unwieldy forces, sanctioned counter-practices begin to look less like seeds of transformative change and more like rituals that not only release the pressures generated by an increasingly disciplined and oppressive social order, but which also help affirm and repair many people's moral feelings about the project and hopes for change. One of the most striking characteristics about the Downtown School's sanctioned counter-practices was that despite being relatively marginal and insubstantial compared to the school's daily routines, they were overwhelmingly featured in the school's publicity materials, showcases for parents, festivals, open houses, tours for the press, planning documents, e-mail blasts, academic reports, journalists' stories and other venues and rituals where the reformers and educators staged self-representations of the school.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, the school's more canonical practices were almost entirely absent from these self-representations.

The vignette at the opening of this chapter illustrates this dynamic playing out. The school's designers, leaders and a visiting journalist entered the back of the classroom right before the teacher introduced the game-like interaction with the sock puppets, a moment that was playfully unconventional for a school. Yet, they left as soon as the class returned to familiar schooling practices. The vignette at the opening of Chapter 2 (Sims, 2017: 24) also illustrated a similar process as journalists and tour guides focused on and staged the school's most cutting-edge technologies and practices while overlooking and even actively excluding its many conventional features—for example, by moving the student working on video-game design out of the classroom and into an empty hallway. What is more, these stagings were always celebratory and they often, but not always, featured the project's distinguishing technologies, such as the semi-immersive embodied learning environment, which, as noted earlier, was rarely used. Additionally, design and media professionals who worked for the non-profit that designed and helped run the school crafted many of these self-representations, and their sophisticated media-production skills lent the representations a heightened sense of professionalism and, hence, legitimacy.

Some readers may be tempted to interpret this elevation of sanctioned counter-practices over more-conventional everyday routines as mere propaganda or public relations. I do not find such interpretations convincing, at least not in projects where many practitioners make significant personal and professional sacrifices in order to practise a form of work that they see as caring and philanthropic. In practice, the periodic elevation of sanctioned counter-practices over everyday routines did not seem to so much conceal reformers' real intentions as help the school's designers, educators and powerful backers realize the collective experience of having good intentions and being cutting-edge. These seeming verifications of the project's idealized potential mattered to reformers, educators and their supporters because the celebration of sanctioned counter-practices

helped produce and sustain the sense that they were committing themselves to something that was both morally good and original. The unusual amount of outside attention, and especially media attention, that the school's sanctioned counter-practices received also helped reaffirm these sentiments.

It would not be a stretch to suggest that sanctioned counter-practices—and the celebratory rituals that surrounded them—often had a quasi-religious inflection to them, in the sense that, when they worked, they helped produce a collective sense that we were participating in something larger and good; I found that they engendered feelings of belonging not just to one another, but also to a forward-looking moral project. Not coincidentally, similar moral sentiments animated the entrepreneurial reformers' (Becker 1963) calls for disruption, and they were repeatedly reinforced by the media's upbeat stories about the school.<sup>9</sup> Given that the school's designers' relied on these powerful outsiders in order to follow up on their insights and yearnings, the collective celebration of sanctioned counter-practices likely helped sooth some of the discomforts of inhabiting this compromised position as it engendered feelings of harmony across various divisions of power.

A brief account of one of my own experiences participating in a sanctioned counter-practice will help illustrate these last points. As mentioned earlier, educators rarely used the school's most spectacular technology, the semi-immersive embodied learning environment, even though it was prominently featured in many public-facing representations of the school. But when the technology was used, nearly everyone treated the occasion as special. One of the school's well-known founders usually ran these sessions, along with two technologists who worked at one of the local universities. The technology required a large white mat that took up about half the room to be laid across the floor, onto which the visuals of an educational game were projected from overhead. Players would interact with the projection on the floor by moving highly reflective Styrofoam balls that a series of cameras around the perimeter of the room could detect, hence allowing the projected imagery to respond, seemingly magically, to the players' gestures. Normally, I did not participate in these games since only a few people could play at a time and I did not want to detract from the students' time with the system. But on one occasion I joined a group game that involved trying to navigate a virtual boat to collect virtual coins while avoiding virtual alligators.

While playing the game with several students, I lost my sense of self-awareness and social differentiation. I felt as if I were part of a collaborative endeavour that was greater than myself, even though the other players were 11 and 12 years old and who, under normal circumstances, were socially differentiated from me. I am fairly certain the other players felt the same, as did many of the other students and staff who cheered us on.<sup>10</sup> When I wrote my field notes that evening, I had an unusually hard time recalling the specifics of the game or how it worked, but the intense feelings of excitement, wonder and belonging that it engendered were still vivid. I am sharing this anecdote not to add yet another account of what play or flow feels like as a psychological experience—the

school's founders called it the rise—but instead to help illustrate how collective experiences with unfamiliar and awe-inspiring technologies can help produce a sense of belonging and enthusiasm not just for the sanctioned counter-practice, but also for the larger collective undertaking that the unconventional practice seems to represent.<sup>11</sup> Later in the day, the designer who had helped design and run the game said to me with seeming excitement, 'It was great to see you get lost in play today!' Her comment stayed with me not just because it had indeed been great to be lost in play, but also because our shared enthusiasm seemed to join us in a way that I had not felt previously. To me, it felt like the enthusiasm that people share after having attending a good concert or sporting event, an excitement rooted in part in the shared recognition that they had together experienced the rise. When experienced as part of a disruptive philanthropic undertaking, these enchanting and exhilarating feelings seemed to epitomize the project's novel and moral promise.

Such feelings surfaced on numerous occasions throughout my time in the field, especially when media outlets visited the school or when the school staged festivals of the students' sanctioned counter-practices for parents and other outsiders. During such moments, I often could not help but share good feelings about the project, and my memories of these moments have repeatedly tempted me to write a more celebratory account of the school. Doing so not only felt like a kind thing to do for the well-intentioned people who had so generously welcomed me into their project, but it also would have helped me feel more hopeful about, and pleased with, the sort of work I have tried to do for much of my professional life.

## Conclusion

I am convinced that most people who design and implement disruptive philanthropic interventions sincerely want to promote what they consider to be beneficial social change. But their ability to do so is compromised from the start by the outsized expectations that are placed on them, as well as by the fairly limited means that they have available. Experts' reliance on powerful outsiders for resources and recognition allow the former to imagine and launch new experiments, but they do so at a cost. In responding to these outsiders' calls for disruption, experts translate broader concerns with the present and hopes for the future into technical diagnoses and prescriptions: they problematize what is wrong with existing remedies, while imagining seemingly new and better ones that will take advantage of the unprecedented opportunities of recent technological breakthroughs. In doing so, they promise social transformations that their philanthropic interventions do not have the power to bring about.

The reformers who founded the Downtown School translated broader concerns with the present, as well as hopes for a promised democratic polity, into a seemingly disruptive pedagogy. They problematized dominant pedagogic

approaches for failing to live up to democratic ideals and designed what they imagined would be more engaging, relevant and equitable pedagogic practices. They saw in video games and new digital media unprecedented opportunities for doing so. And yet most of daily life at the Downtown School ended up looking much like daily life at a more-conventional school, and it became even more conventional as the Downtown School aged. Despite reformers' aspirations for a student-centred pedagogy, students had little say over either the goal or the mode of their activities. At nearly all points during the day, educators directed students to enact tightly scripted behaviours, often these scripts were broken into fine-grained step-by-step instructions and non-compliance was increasingly reprimanded. Even during recess, students were subjected to near-constant surveillance and strict limitations on their behaviour. Much of what ended up being playful and unconventional about the Downtown School was the terminology that reformers used to describe canonical schooling practices. And yet, despite all this conventionality, many of the people who had committed themselves to the project maintained the sense that the school's pedagogic practices were both philanthropic and cutting-edge. How should we make sense of this rather wide gap between ideals and acts?

I have been arguing that reformers become fixated on what they can foreseeably control and transform with the new means that they have available. In the context of a concrete reform project, reformers translate broader yearnings for social change into narrow problems and solutions that their new tools can foreseeably fix, even though many of the factors and forces that will constitute the project, not to mention the social problems that a project is designed to address, extend far beyond reformers' reach. Reformers tend to conceptualize their projects as if they can dismantle and reassemble inherited worlds and systems when their projects are also, and more so, assembled by these worlds and systems. The reformers and educators who founded the Downtown School could not control much of the curriculum, many aspects of the school's physical space, the mandate to administer state tests, the age-graded organization of schooling, the allocation of funding per pupil or, critically, whether students would desire and enjoy the version of fun that the school was offering. What reformers and educators could more easily transform was some of the terminology and equipment they used within the school. They could also more easily transform how they represented themselves to themselves and outsiders. And they were able, more or less, to realize their pedagogic ideals during small and bounded periods that temporarily held at bay aspects of the project that they could not otherwise control.

An important feature of these pedagogic fixations is that they entailed substantial blind spots that revealed themselves only once unanticipated forces overflowed reformers' plans and started destabilizing the project in ways that appeared to threaten its survival. In facing this instability, the dominant tendency of reformers and educators was to engage in a different sort of fixation: reformers and educators quickly reached for resources that could stabilize the

project; ironically, many of these resources came from canonical versions of the institution that reformers aimed to disrupt. Set against such tensions and contradictions, moments that more closely approximated reformers' pedagogic ideals, what I have been calling sanctioned counter-practices, took on an experiential and symbolic significance that far exceeded their role in the project and that was in no way commensurate with their potential to bring about substantive social change.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Educational game designers refer to this form of 'edutainment' as the 'chocolate-covered broccoli' approach, a phrase whose origin is frequently attributed to Laurel (2001). What is puzzling is that the designers of the school knew about and even shared this critique of edutainment and yet they also appeared to believe that they were doing something more substantively transformative.
- <sup>2</sup> I find parallels between this management technique and the 'scrum' and 'sprint' techniques used in Agile software development. In both cases, managers impose an ambitious temporal constraint on collective tasks, and in doing so they can make the tasks feel urgent and important. As those who have worked in start-ups know, this feeling of being constantly rushed can be quite intoxicating and can help motivate employees. The original metaphor seems to have been taken from rugby, a highly physical and competitive sport that can evoke a similar rush among players.
- <sup>3</sup> Each Wednesday afternoon, educators, school leaders, some of the school's designers and often representatives from the school's SSO held a professional development session. While I was not able to observe these meetings, I noticed that all the educators would introduce a new technique at the same time, typically following a professional development session. I got the impression, confirmed in some informal conversations with educators, that professional development sessions were often a mechanism for distributing classroom- management best practices among educators. More experienced educators and school leaders appear to have introduced some best practices, but others appear to have come from the SSO. In subsequent conversations with educators from other schools, I have learned that many of these techniques are quite pervasive in contemporary urban public schools in the United States.
- <sup>4</sup> When the school moved into its new home, they were able to renovate some of these spaces, but they could not change basic architectural arrangements, such as classrooms.
- <sup>5</sup> In response to didactic and infantilizing lessons, students would often express solidarity with their peers by doing things like making eye contact and rolling their eyes or, more confrontationally, by pretending for educators that they were in fact ignorant about the lesson, hence baiting

educators to offer even more didactic instruction, a response that could delight other students when the educators took the bait.

- <sup>6</sup> Anthropologists and qualitative sociologists have long observed such dynamics in the processes by which persons learn to become members of a social group. See Geertz (1972) and Weider (1974) as classic examples. Such rites of passage are especially common in tightly knit organizations like fraternities and sororities, boarding school, the military and the police.
- <sup>7</sup> See Stallybrass and White (1986), who drew on Mikhail Bakhtin. See also Taylor (2007), who drew on Victor Turner's (1969) analysis of relations between structure and antistructure in rituals.
- <sup>8</sup> Anthropologists and cultural theorists have long drawn attention to the importance of these ritualistic stagings of group self-representation. My interest is in a variant of these stagings in which insiders present themselves as counter-normative in moral terms.
- <sup>9</sup> For a similar account of the production of effervescence in contemporary software production, see Fred Turner's (2009) analysis of relations between Burning Man and Google. Turner draws in part on Durkheim's famous analysis of the basis of religious feeling, but argued that such ritualized practices are central to contemporary models of tech production. As already noted, such models informed the plans for the Downtown School.
- <sup>10</sup> The phenomenology of these sorts of experiences has been documented in different disciplines and discourse communities, perhaps most famously in Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) notion of *flow*. The designers of the Downtown School referred to such experiences as 'the rise', which has much in common with other notions that have recently become popular among tech-ed reformers, one of which, 'geeking out', I helped propagate (see Ito et al. 2010). In the schooling context, I see sanctioned counter-practices such as these as akin to the Friday night football games that constitute such an important community ritual at many more conventional American high schools.
- <sup>11</sup> David Nye's (1994) historical study of what he calls the *American technological sublime* reaches a similar conclusion about the potential for new technologies to engender feelings of awe and belonging, but Nye focuses on the project of constructing an American national identity. In my case, the subliminal power of new technologies also contributed to reverent feelings of belonging, but with respect to the philanthropic initiative of which they were a part. See also Leo Marx's (1964) discussion of the technological sublime, as well as Vincent Mosco's (2004) analysis of the digital sublime.

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