



Module – Life Course

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1. Why teach this module?

Life course is a multilayered process of individual and collective behavior related with beliefs, institutionalized practices and symbolism. Many phases and transitory moments in the course of life (childhood, schooling, adulthood, marriage, work integration etc.) are experienced and attested through the performance of rituals, social practices of collective character and importance, with repetitive actions and fixed meanings. The schooling period is an important stage of life for children's development and social integration. Various transitions in physical or social domains coexist with liminal "thresholds" (McLauren, 1993) and constructed boundaries between localities, temporalities, identities and social structures (barriers between the outside environment and the school building, corridors between classrooms, breaks between classes, relationships between friends and students, or students and teaching personnel). Transition rituals legitimize social categorizations, constitute social positions and roles, delineate spaces and regulate behavior.

This module concerns both teachers and students. It demonstrates the significance of rituals in the school's daily life and provides an understanding of the complex systems of ritual performances within the school community. Through the use of ethnographic examples and activities, the course introduces ways of reflecting on teacher-student interaction within educational institutions and practices. How does a child experience the procedure of leaving home and entering to school community? What is the role of teacher in this transition? These are some questions that this module will address.

2. Ethnographic Entry Points

The existing literature on ritual and schooling (McLaren 1987, 1993; Bernstein et alia 1966) focuses on issues of maintaining control and order, and the transmission and embodiment of school rules. According to McLaren's ethnography on a Catholic junior high school, a school is a rich repository of rituals that initiates students into the school community, instructs them in school values, strengthens their desire to learn and welcomes them as members the student body.

McLaren offered a variety of ritualized practices in the school life. The micro rituals are activities that take place every day (morning prayer, prayer before lunch). The macro rituals are the total amount of lessons in a single school day. The revitalization rituals "function to inject a renewal of commitment in the participants". The intensification rituals unify students or teachers, or both within the classroom. And, finally, the rituals of resistance, part of the subculture of the urban, immigrant Portuguese adolescents that include the conscious or unconscious efforts that students make to subvert school rules, and norms. McLaren reveals how students move in and out of the "school state" transitioning through the "streetcorner state"—a liminal place, betwixt and between according to Turner terms (1969). For McLaren, rituals it's not only a technique that improves learning and bonds the



school community, but also “uncovering mechanisms that reveal political enforcement to a status quo that advantages some to the disadvantage of others” (Quantz, O’ Connor and Magolda 2011: 18).

Ghaye and Pascal (1988) propose some activities (the purchasing of the school uniform and a welcoming speech by the head of the school) that could facilitate the transition from home to school for the first graders and their parents. In the same vein, Patricia Scully and Jacqueline Howell (2008) analyze the “I Love You Dinner” that a preschool classroom holds every year to promote the bonding among teachers, students, and parents. The purposes of these rituals are to help children enter their new community, that is school, and create a bond between them, their parents and school teachers.

3. Ways of understanding

Ritual is a certain pattern of behaviour with symbolic meaning for participants. Victor Turner (1969) sees rituals as a method of social control. Turner argued that rites of passage are antithetical to the existing social structure. He spoke of “anti structure”, a state which exists when people cross over the threshold and enter into a “liminal” situation, where they find themselves in between two stages. During this period, people may experience a phenomenon that Turner named “communitas”. As he observed, when adolescent Ndembu males [the African people he studied] underwent ritual initiation into manhood, they developed a special communitarian bond while they were separated from the other members of the community. McLaren has been influenced by Turner when he described all the antistructure activities that can challenge school order and rules.

Rites of passage. The term was introduced by Van Gennep (1960 [1909]). It described ceremonies that signify a significant transition from one social status to another. This transition consists of three stages: separation, transition, and incorporation. In the first phase, the individual has left the group he/she belonged; in the third stage, he/she reenters the society, having completed the ritual. The intermediate stage is the liminal period, during which people have left one state but have not yet entered or joined the next.

Body, Embodiment (Turner). The body plays a crucial role during the ritual. It experiences all the changes and the stages of transition. Situated in the educational context, embodiment is a way of conceptualizing personhood. It addresses the ways the embodied self is performed in social interactions, discursive practices, power struggles, discriminatory behavior and identification and categorization processes. Neill and Caswell (1993) have argued that teachers should be trained in order to recognise and interpret body language messages (gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice) from pupils.

School represents the separation phase in the rite of passage, where children leave their homes and families and enter a new world, the school world. At this level, children learn to listen to non kin, stranger adults, respect and obey school rules. The everyday practices and activities in the classroom reflect an organization routine embodying and transmitting the culture of the classroom.

Approaches to life course are useful for discussing and understanding:

- The importance of daily rituals in the classroom. They are not only reminders of the appropriate behaviour in class rules; they help students center their thinking and learning.
- Teachers should try not to use too many rituals during course. There is a possibility that students will get bored and disobey the teacher.



4. Suggested Exercises

The module will be divided in two parts. In this proposed version, it is designed to last for 8 hours. In the first part, that will last for 3 hours, participants will get familiar with key anthropological concepts (ritual, rite of passage, embodiment) and ethnographic examples about rituals and ritualized behavior in school settings. The second part will be divided in two sections of 3 and 2 hours respectively. In the first part, participants will be asked to reflect on the kinds of rituals and ritualized behavior they have observed or experienced in the school life. Are there any similarities or differences between the ethnographic examples they read and their experiences? Have they recognized the three stages of van Geenep's rites of passage? Then, they will be asked to discuss examples of such behavior they have noticed and of the ways they have or could have reacted. Have they noticed any kind of *communitas* bonding between students? Are they (the teachers) behave with a ritualized way during lesson? How these rituals help students cope with their daily life in school/ in class? During the last stage, they can discuss and propose some ritualized routines that could follow during their classes.

Here we can give some examples of ritualized daily routines that teacher may have noticed. Teachers may attend how children treat the door as a threshold that separates classroom from the other school spaces. Are there any patterns? Do all children behave in the same way when they enter the class? Are there any children going in and out over the threshold? Is there any ritualized activity/movement expressing that the door is the border area of the classroom and someone needs permission for access? Are there elements of *communitas* inside the classroom or outside, in the corridor, in the yard? How is it expressed? Are there any other ritualized arrival activities (students say good morning to the teacher altogether while he enters the door),

Another ritualized behavior could be every time a new student comes to the classroom. Is there a specific greeting, gesture or talk that children say or do to the new classmate? The design of a pattern of procedures that would convey the welcoming message could be helpful.

5. Learning Prospects

- Participants are familiarized with basic anthropological concepts about life stages transitions
- Participants understand the interaction of rituals and society and the role that they play in school
- Participants reflect on the ritualized behaviors that take place in their classes and their own role in these rituals

6. Literature

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Further Readings

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The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.