Dear Participants in ECI 696,

Welcome to ECI 696 – Professional Problems of Teachers! This is a very exciting, if not depressing and stressful, period in education. I do not recall any time when political and corporate forces have been so intensely involved in controlling education in the United States. Nor, do I recall any other period of time in which parents and teachers have been so involved in criticizing and protesting these political and corporate forces. So, as we work our way through the readings, videos, and discussions for this course, I hope that each of you will look for ways of taking action to recreate meaningful schooling contexts for our children.

Let me take some time to introduce myself.

I have been involved in teaching at one level or another since 1974. I've taught grades 2 through 12 in New York City; Columbia, SC; North, SC (always confuses people ☺); and Houston, TX with shorter terms of teaching while an academic in Kingston, Ontario, Canada and Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, along with some dabbling with children here in Flagstaff. I did my doctoral work at the University of Houston and started my academic career at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, then moved to Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, then to Morgan State University in Baltimore, and finally to NAU in 1999.

Although my "specialty" is science education, my concerns and interests are much broader. Briefly, these concerns and interests are:

1. The growth and development of children as decent, thoughtful, and creative human beings.

2. Learning as an ongoing process of developing complex understandings that lead to critical thinking, creativity, and abilities to transfer such understandings to novel contexts.

3. Relationships and connectedness: to oneself, to others, to the environment, and to the world of ideas. See one of my blog entries: http://blog.jeffbloom.net/2010/10/14/disconnects-%E2%80%93-a-brief-initial-exploration.

4. Problems of teaching, learning, and schooling in contemporary society (within the contexts of the history, philosophy, and theories of curriculum).

You can learn more about me on my websites:

- http://www.jeffbloom.net — my personal professional site

- http://blog.jeffbloom.net — My Blog

- https://nau.academia.edu/JeffBloom -- My Academia.Edu page

- http://exploringsciencewiki.wikidot.com/start — The Exploring Science Wiki

- http://metapatterns.wikidot.com — Metapatterns: The Pattern Underground Wiki

- http://ecomind.wikidot.com — Ecology—Mind—Systems Wiki

Some of these sites are relatively new and relate to projects I'm trying to get started. If you're interested in participating in any of the Wikis in particular, please let me know.

In addition to this more academic side of me, I have a weird sense of humor that includes everything from slapstick to irony. Much of my humor focuses on making fun of our assumptions about how things work (hierarchies, authority, power, etc.). I'll try my best to indicate humor with smiley faces, but if I forget, please forgive me. Because of my emphasis on relationships, I tend not to be "mean" unless I've totally given up on someone (almost never a student, though). It's usually administrators, peers, and politicians, who should know better – with whom I've tried to work, but with no success. Even then, I tend to not pay any attention to them, rather than to engage in discussions that lead nowhere. So, if you think I'm being mean and nasty, I'm probably just trying to insert humor, but not doing so well at it. In fact, my wife and kids think I fail at humor much more often than I succeed. My philosophy of humor is that the more you try, just by mere probabilities, the more you'll actually hit on something funny. ☺

We'll all be involved in the Schools—Teachers—Parents Wiki (http://schoolsteachersparents.wikidot.com) as part of this course. In fact, most of our discussions will occur on this site (**not** BbLearn) and your assignments will be posted on this site, as well. Some of the initial introductions and technical discussions about the course will take place on a private Google Group. However, we have had problems with Google Groups in the past. If it doesn't work, we can talk by "replying to all" through email or just use the wiki forum.

I think that part of our professional responsibility lies in communicating with other teachers and with the general public. If we're discussing the problems of teaching and schooling, then we should be doing so with a public audience. This is the rationale for using a publicly accessible wiki.

This online course concerns the very broad topic of the professional problems of teachers.

For me, this sentence itself contains two problems:

1. "Online course" – From the perspective of my particular "philosophy" and theoretical orientations towards teaching and learning, the "online" "delivery" or "consuming" of instruction contradicts the very core of what I consider to be vital to human learning. I don't see that specific "content" is all that important. Instead, I see the social construction (or production) of knowledge as central. Such collaborative construction of knowledge builds relationships to oneself (as the development of confidence), to others through collaboration, and to the world of ideas. See my blog entry critique of distance education: "The Travesty of Distance Education" (http://blog.jeffbloom.net/2010/10/14/the-travesty-of-%E2%80%9Cdistance-education/).

2. "Professional" – The term "professional" is an example of a word that has lost its meaning. Everyone has a different meaning and connotation for the word "professional." At the same time, it can be used to silence, marginalize, and control others. At some point in time, "professional" was a word of personal power (not power over others). However, it can now be used to label someone as not being professional, because they do not fit within a narrow mold of expectations. In fact, it often creates

double binds (we'll talk more about this later), but you can see an initial treatment on my blog: "Confusion: Double Bind or Connection in the Classroom" (http://blog.jeffbloom.net/2010/10/14/confusion-double-bind-or-connection-in-the-classroom/).

However, even though we have these two problems facing us, I'd like to see if we can't run this course as a stimulating and critical seminar, instead of a jump-through-the-hoops content-focused course.

The challenge is that if everyone does not participate fully, the course goes nowhere. I would like to avoid coercion and other standard practices of "making" people participate (with the exception of the "assessment of online discussions," which will be disregarded if everyone participates). Instead, I would like all of you to jump in and participate in discussions, which will be the primary focus of the course. But, as mentioned, a small element of coercion is that "yes" you will receive a grade on participation. This participation will be graded on a combination of quantity and substance.

Some key points about navigating this course:

- Do NOT use BBLearn for any part of this course.

- Email me directly at either jeff.bloom@nau.edu or jeff@jeffbloom.net for turning in assignments, questions, etc.

- Post critical analyses and the final project paper within the Course Wiki Forum (and as a wiki page, if you wish).

- Substantive discussions will take place on the "ECI 696 – Summer, 2014" forum: http://schoolsteachersparents.wikidot.com/forum/c-912710/eci-696-summer-2014.

- Initial introductions will take place on Google Groups (if it works) at https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/eci696group, otherwise we can discuss by using everyone's email addresses or by using the wiki forum.

- You will receive an automated invitation to join **wikidot** and our **course wiki**. Follow the instructions to set up an account on Wikidot and on the **Schools—Teachers—Parents Wiki**. Save your login information and make sure your name appears in the upper right-hand corner of the wiki page when you access the site and/or after logging in.

- In order to access most of the **readings**, you will have to use a username and password. The password protected readings are kept in a locked folder on another site. To access, these readings use the following information:

  → **USERNAME**: student
  → **PASSWORD**: schools4children!

- I do not always respond to each forum post, but rather respond to thematic concerns, etc. on a regular basis. If you want me to respond to something, please use my name to ask me to respond.

There will be only three formal written products. These products will **not** be posted on BBLearn (there is a shell for the section of the course, but it only contains information about accessing an external site). Please access the course on the **Schools—Teachers— Parents wiki** at: (http://schoolsteachersparents.wikidot.com/groups:eci696). So, rather than write a paper for the "teacher" (me), you are writing these papers for an international audience, but especially for an **audience of peers and parents**. By the way, this wiki website has had over 108,000 unique visits and over 147,000 page loads since its inception about four years ago. It averages over 100 visits a day (almost twice that of a year ago). So, please take your writing and posting seriously. Take the time to proofread and have others read and comment on your writing. Poorly written work reflects bady on all teachers. People from all over the world are visiting this site, so keep that in mind.

1. **Critical Analyses** – these papers will be 750—1,000 words and will apply one or more of the analytical frameworks (discussed in Modules #2 and #3) to a problem or issue of interest to you.

2. **Final Paper** – this paper is a major research paper that is a combination of your own stories, analyses, and the research and/or theorizing of others as found in the literature. This paper needs to be written for an informed general public audience, much like the popular books on science and social sciences that are found in Barnes & Noble, and other bookstores. This paper is not "written for the professor" as part of the typical schooling game, but is written to a public audience as part of an effort to communicate the problems involved in teaching and schooling.

In addition, I don't think it is particularly useful to specify the details or otherwise restrict the choices of assignments such as the ones for this course. Such constraints diminish creativity, ownership, and insightfulness.

Although I have gone through the syllabus and the website repeatedly, there may still be errors or omissions. Please let me know if you find any problems. And, please be patient as we work out the kinks.

I only wish we were meeting face—to—face, where we could more fully develop relationships and take advantage of spontaneity (neither of which the online environment is particularly good at encouraging).

If you're ever in Flagstaff, please make sure we meet for coffee.

Best wishes,

Jeff Bloom

P.S.
I've attached a letter I distribute to my face—to—face students. It may be of interest in terms of situating my approach to teaching and learning in a bigger context.

A Letter to My Students

My approach to teaching may be radically different from anything you have experienced before. At least that is what I gather from conversations with former students. I'm writing this "letter" in order to clarify what I am trying to accomplish.

Most teaching we have experienced has been based on following the agenda of the teacher. Following such an agenda is not just a measure of what content has been covered, but is a measure of what the teacher "thinks" she or he has accomplished. Very little of this agenda has anything to do with what students *actually* have learned and understood.

However, this word "learning" is very tricky. Ordinarily, this term is used to describe how well students have done on a test, but tests don't necessarily measure anything that has to do with learning. From the perspective of my approach to this course, learning has several different dimensions:

1. *Learning* certainly has to do with the development of *conceptual understandings* of whatever subject matter one is studying. This learning has degrees of depth, extent, abstraction, and complexity. You may learn certain concepts, but that learning may be relatively superficial and confined to a very specific context or situation. On the other hand, this learning may involve great depth, may extend across multiple contexts, may involve relevant abstracted principles and models, and may be intricately interrelated with other understandings in ways that allow one to make sense of novel situations.

2. *Learning* has to do with one's sense of *identity* as a learner and participant in the community of teachers or scholars (of teaching). When we really learn about something, we are integrating that learning into who we are as a participant in whatever discipline we are studying to be a part. This integration into ourselves changes who we are, how we view ourselves, and how we act, talk, and think. This learning may occur without any explicit recognition that it is occurring.

3. *Learning* has to do with grasping new *meanings* in what we do and how we do it. In this case, these meanings have to do with being a teacher or scholar of teaching. Before we grasp these new meanings, we may go on a vacation and have a great time and learn about a new area or culture. After we have acquired this "new meaning" of being a teacher, we could take the same kind of vacation, have a great time, but what we learn is through the lens of a teacher. We not only learn about the new area or culture, but we see how this new learning can affect our teaching and relationships with students.

4. *Learning* has to do with developing *relationships* of all kinds: with students, with colleagues, with parents, with various subject matter concepts, and with all kinds of experiences and insights. Learning is seeing relationships.

5. *Learning* is about exploring our *assumptions* with the possibility of strengthening some assumptions and throwing out others. Such learning can be frustrating, frightening, and exhilarating (and possibly all at once). This is the kind of learning that is **transformative**.

In order for these kinds of learning to take place within this course, everyone needs to fully engage in the following aspects:

1. Participating **fully** in each activity and discussion.

2. Reading and thinking about what you've read.

3. Working with children as an engaged "teacher."

4. Critically and analytically reflecting on how #1, #2, and #3 connect (what are the relationships?).

In addition, I have designed assignments and activities:

- to help overthrow assumptions with the possibility of transformative learning;
- to help you compose a new identity as a teacher;
- to learn in ways that are more complex with depth, extent, and abstraction;
- to help you develop new meaning as a teacher;
- to re-ignite and foster your creativity;
- to re-ignite and foster your real intelligence that schooling may have suppressed;
- to re-ignite and foster your curiosity.

This course may be frustrating, because our experiences with schooling may have "taught" us to be:

- passive learners;
- dependent learners (dependent on the teacher);
- linear learners;
- conformists;
- procrastinators;
- "successful" by going-through-the-motions (but not learn very much).

As a result, we find it difficult:

- to take initiative;
- to take responsibility for our own learning;
- to work on open-ended, ill-defined tasks (much like those we'll encounter teaching);
- to be creative;
- to think deeply and critically;
- to take risks;
- to self-assess as the primary "bottom-line" (as opposed to playing the grade game);
- to appreciate learning as non-linear;
- to be an independent learner and worker;
- to be a knowledge producer as opposed to a knowledge consumer
- to be curious;
- to be open to new ideas;
- to be open to transformative learning;

… I try to create a community in our classroom, where you can *play*, *try out new things*, *explore*, *take risks*, *fail*, *succeed*, *make mistakes*, *create*, *have fun*, *think hard*, *think deeply*, *be creative*, *laugh*, *think critically*, *become frustrated*, *scream*, and basically *become a revolutionary teacher*.

Jeff