Perspectives of Schooling through Karaoke: A metaphorical analysis

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Abstract

This paper plays with education through the analogy of karaoke to tease out the instructions of a situated educational practice. Here, Cremin's conceptualization of education as a deliberate, systematic and sustained effort is employed as a starting point to enable an understanding of educational practice between members elicited by karaoke. Using Garfinkel's ethnomethodological framework, the paper investigates modes of education through karaoke practice as part of the 'live' narrative, that of instructing and being instructed with the 'curriculum' of the event at hand.

Key words: education, instruction, schooling, social learning, situated practice, karaoke, ethnomethodology

Introduction

Current education policy in the United States is entrenched in debates of school vouchers, special education, bilingual instruction, teacher quality, national standards, and other indicators that propel urgency and inspiration for further research in such domains. Pocketed thematically, educational researchers often strive to help 'solve' an issue that plagues the educational system, to make right a wrong, to overturn failure to success (Varenne & McDermott, 1998). Yet in this well meaning endeavor, the larger perception of education as an experiential and interactive process gets lost in this maze of census and con(census), of narrowing educational experiences to prescriptions for success.

This study views educational practice through Cremin's conceptualization of education as that of a 'deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit, evoke, or acquire knowledge, attitudes, values, skills, or sensibilities, and any learning that results from the effort, direct or indirect, intended or unintended' (1978, p. 567). The pursuit of alternative views of educational practice is important in today's scholarship as much of what has come to constitute as 'education' is seen through the limited lens of schooling, relegating the complexities of education in day-to-day occurrences as spontaneous, unsystematic and incidental.

Cremin problematizes the dichotomy between schooling and society, particularly in the view that in the 'ordinary course of living, education is incidental; in schooling, education is intentional' (Cremin, 1975, p. 2). In doing so, he challenges the progressive education ideology of Dewey (1916) that espouses complex societies seeking for means of organizing themselves through the 'intentional' agencies and

institutions such as schools that control environments in which children may 'act, think and feel' (Dewey, 1916, p. 3). Cremin rejects the proposition that the systematization of cultural transmission is the prerogative of schooling. Instead, he
seeks to explicitly underline the 'curricula' embedded in all institutions, be it the family, the church, the museums and in this case, karaoke bars. These institutions, like other major educative agencies perform a mediative role with society through its continuous and systematic interpretation of institutional values. In this case, the karaoke bar is one such institutional space that aids in the process of interpreting and reconstituting conventional schooling values through its lens.
Cremin offers a new formulation for education: 'the theory of education becomes the theory of the relation of various educative interactions and institutions to one another and to the society at large' (Cremin, 1975, p. 6). In other words, by paying attention to other institutions that educate such as karaoke bars, we legitimize alternative modes of education and find merit in that which we interact and make meaning with on a day-to-day basis. More importantly, this attempt enables us to see with a fresh perspective the conventional institution of schooling, recognizing its processes, enactments and encounters as more dynamic, intentional and deliberate play.

This paper is divided into two main sections: the first section makes overt the process of searching for a karaoke bar, drawing parallels to searching for the 'right school' where assumptions of demographics, privileges, and affordances of its space confronts possible and often conflicting alternatives and misconceptions, complicating the selection act. The author requests the reader to *play along* with this metaphor, and in doing so, re-examine the questions that are being asked of education and
thereby, of oneself. The second section explores the Garfinkel moments in the ethnography of a karaoke experience that reveals the 'common sense' character of the event, the innate social structures that the members are constrained by and enact with through their interactions and encounters. 'Common sense', then is just the temporary absence of instruction about what to do next (Varenne, 2007, p. 1585). This live narrative through a karaoke experience is meant to serve as a metaphor for schooling, as a reminder to the reader of the range of learning and teaching that can manifest within an educative environment. Overall, as play becomes education and education play, the property of its experiences is revealed.

Karaoke as Context
Karaoke (pronounced karey-okey) refers to the usage of pre-recorded musical accompaniments to facilitate amateur singing (Lum, 1996). In fact, the word karaoke in Japanese consists of two components: *kara* meaning 'empty' and *oke* , meaning 'orchestra' (p. 1). This 'empty' space is meant to be 'filled' by the amateur performer as s/he sings along with a song of his/her choice guided by the highlighted lyrics on the screen. Karaoke emerged as a form of communal entertainment in bars in Kobe, Japan in the 1970s and became pervasive through the emergence of special machines that enabled the integration of popular music, text and microphone inputs for amateur singing. However, it has been observed that in general, the Anglo-American population in the United States continues to exhibit discomfort

at the concept of singing karaoke publicly (Mitsui, 2001). McLuhan (1976) attributes this Anglo-American reserve to the development of their institutions for socialization that is designed to maintain privacy even in public spaces: 'North Americans may well be the only people who go outside to be alone and inside to be social' (p. 46). The first US karaoke bars appeared in 1983, catering mostly to Asian clientele but by the end of the 1980s, bars in the US began to market itself to the general public (Zimmerman, 1991). In this paper, the choice of karaoke as an analogy for schooling is seen as appropriate and in tandem with the authors view of schooling as essentially an 'import' of norms that participants deliberately and continually are in the act of transforming and making sense, for themselves and others encountered for a shared experience. The fact that karaoke seems to correlate remotely with schooling is useful as it enables us to focus on the educative moments irrespective of the setting. The learning that occurs within the karaoke event is free of some of the constraints of more institutionalized and restrained settings such as schools. Thereby, learning is made more visible in such an improvisational environment.

Part I
Karaoke: Actors and Spaces
The beauty of a Google search is in its immediacy to reveal assumptions of concepts that are implicit in the researchers approach to a question. Sometimes, what is considered 'basic' and evident to the researcher is at times challenged by the responses to the keywords entered. While the search tool serves as a useful device to keep the researcher alert to certain preconceptions, it should by no means be treated as the 'reality' of one's quest. What is of importance here is the organic logic that stems from search results that facilitates alternative views that is part of but by no means a substitute for ethnographic study.
The author was in search of karaoke bars in Queens, New York, hoping to target a low-income immigrant community as participants, in this case South Asians. What was discovered through the first search attempt for the words 'Karaoke and Queens' (see Figure 1) was that karaoke is not necessarily an act *per se* as performed in bars; rather, practices are situated within a range of spaces, weddings and home spaces for instance, mediated by home videos through social software like YouTube and MySpace. This echoes of popular (mis)perceptions of education mired in theories of individual learning where learning is an isolated and narrowed activity of specific knowledge acquisition confined within schools, dismissive of its innate sociality with a wide array of institutions and agencies.

Further, Queens, instead of being 'interpreted' as a borough of New York was linked to sites where 'karaoke queens' are available for 'rent' for special events. Moving from location to person, karaoke through this simple search underwent a re-definition of a subject-object entity. The second entry 'karaoke and Jackson Heights' was in the hope of narrowing the search for an appropriate site, revealing instead a wider range of social interactive spaces formalized through Yahoogroups affiliated by genre of music, languages and area; there are also sites for 'serious' karaoke competitions in the New York area:

Does it occur to you that it's been quite a while since the last major singing contest was held in New York? Have you been looking for a place to showcase your talent to your community? We, the founders of New York Asian Music (NYAM) realized that there are many of you *singing queens/kings* [emphasis added] out there who have been thirsty for a big chance to make your debut.

Interestingly, at the start, the author mistook the phrase 'karaoke queens' as transgender performers but with the second search it was clear that this term was part of a more organized body of *language* and activity that marked boundaries for participants that are 'serious' members of karaoke.

This finding mirrors Cremin's celebration of alternative educative spaces as equal if not more formalized in their educating of the individual. He warns that if these spaces are dismissed as spontaneous and unstructured in favor of the more conventional institutional bodies such as schools, 'teaching and mis(teaching) would be ultimately condemned to ineffectiveness' (1988, p. 441). Lave takes this further by declaring that it is not just that informal learning is composed of intricately contextembedded and situated activity but that 'there is nothing else' (1996, p. 155). In a sense, education is seen to subsume culture and politics, the informal and the formal, the incidental and the intentional.

In the third search, 'karaoke bars and Jackson Heights', only one website was retrieved that was relevant to the topic. This was an upscale sports/karaoke bar site that advertised Monday Night Football and showed a Caucasian man leaning against the bar appearing to chat with a Caucasian woman, both in semi-formal attire. This image contrasted with the census data on Jackson Heights as the melting pot of low-income immigrants, particularly South Asians. While this data by itself gives us little insight into the conditions of the Jackson Heights environment, it serves as a warning not to reify spaces and demographics based on census data. It doesn't take much to make the leap to the categorization of individuals and schools along the lines of test scores for example, where individuals and entire schooling environments are marked as 'failures' or 'successes', often discounting tremendous individual and group efforts to resist, transform and shape such labels (Varenne & McDermott, 1998).

Further, given that the main research pursuit is in unearthing educational modes in karaoke practice as a parallel to schooling, the question of whether a particular population (i.e. South Asian immigrants) at a specific location (bar—neighborhood-Queens) and with a particular income demographic is relevant to the research pursuit needed to be asked. While it became apparent that karaoke *happens* at events, weddings, ceremonies, homes, and online spaces, venue *per se* is not the prime determining factor in gaining insight into education through karaoke, given the underlining Cremenian logic of education as interaction across settings. Besides, there is no claim here of generalizing bars as representative of spaces fostering karaoke interactions. What is important though is the Cremin insistence

upon detail: after all, 'educational history has too often been short on detail and long on generalization' (Cremin, 1988, p. 438).

The fourth search, namely 'karaoke bars New York', provided a listing of 53 karaoke bars in New York and reviews along categories of whether these karaoke spaces were crowded, trendy, romantic, good for after work, good for dancing, good for a social scene, or a good happy hour (see Figure 1). While these categories contribute to the 'perceived normality' (Garfinkel, 1963, p. 188) of karaoke bars, they also serve as markers of what is not expected of karaoke bars. In searching for 'good' bars, instead of asking if these 'good' karaoke bars reflect the preferences of most people in New York, a more valid question is whether what is being looked at by the seekers of karaoke is important to their expectation of the karaoke experience. While it is easier to identify the indicators that make for the markers of experience, it is harder to find consensus amongst reviewers on what makes for a 'good' experience.

For instance, the bar 'Karaoke One 7' selected as the site for analysis in this paper has multiple and conflicting reviews on what makes for a good bar. Located in the Chelsea 'gay district',on the West Side of Manhattan, it is open daily, 2 pm to 4 am, 7 days a week, and seems to be a 'regular' bar with a public lounge and nine private karaoke rooms with a library of more than 80,000 songs updated monthly. Also, it claims to be 'serious' about karaoke due to its large music collection in multiple genres and languages. In the reviews of this bar, the two indicators most repeated as grounds for preference is the short wait for the turn to sing and the 'friendliness' of bartenders, attributed to the overall ambiance of the bar. However, in these reviews, one person's dream space is another's nightmare. There are 4 online reviews of this bar, two negative and two positive. The first reviewer declared it to be a disappointing experience as the song selection was limited given the bars online claim of having at least 80,000 songs in multiple languages, 'That's false advertising! The bar is small, has a skimpy food menu, and the sound system is poor to average. It was just a very disappointing experience all around'. However the reviewer admitted that the positive aspect of this bar was its short wait to sing. The second comment was about the bad service the person received where the waiters were 'stone cold'. However, the other two reviewers were ecstatic about their experience at this bar where the experience was claimed as 'fun' and 'the best in town':

Both reviewers commented the very opposite on the song collection and service:

Despite having been totally stood up by someone I met in a drunken sing-song stupor here, I STILL return (incognito) because it is just SUCH a blast! Staff is friendly, drink specials are the best ($2.50 for sake bombs and $3.75 for a STIFF vodka cran), the song list is great, the patrons are nonjudgmental (so feel free to sing whacha want—Bee Gees anyone?), located next to BLT Fish for after drink bites. So, all there's left to do is

grab the mic and say 'Can you keep up, baby boi'?
while the other stated that:

I've been searching for a Karaoke bar that is more uptown then most of
the village spots. This place has a nice bar area, if you don't want to rent
a room. It also has the best overall updated music selection I've seen. The
staff is friendly! What more could you ask for! it's definitely the BEST
PLACE IN TOWN!!!

What is of interest is not just that these reviewers conflict in their views on the bar
but that they conflict on the very same aspects, namely the ambiance of the bar
(space, friendliness of the bartenders) and performance enablers (songs choice,
costs, and attitude).

Much like the classroom, each student comes with their own framework of needs
and preferences of what works for them pedagogically and on this basis, often
'judges' the quality of education being afforded to them. What makes for a 'good'
educational experience that shapes this personal framework lies not in the conditions
of the environment or the individual alone: the innate attributes of the student, the
student-teacher ratio, the facilities of the classroom, the nature of instruction, the
content of the textbooks and the like. Rather, it is in the specific temporal deliberation,
political and social organization and situated orchestration of these people and
things that generate a range of educative experiences, some good, some bad and
some plain ugly. This collective human productivity needs to constantly reproduce
itself, and in the reproduction of this complexity, there is a generation of Garfinkel-like
new ordinary educative moments. One way to view 'good' learning is as an accomplishment,
from peripheral to full participation as Lave (1991) describes:

Learning, it seems to me, is neither wholly subjective nor fully encompassed
in social interaction, and it is not constituted separately from the social
world (with its own structures and meanings) of which it is part. This
recommends a decentered view of the locus and meaning of learning, in
which learning is recognized as a social phenomenon constituted in the
experienced, lived-in world, through legitimate peripheral participation in
ongoing social practice: the process of changing knowledgeable skill is
subsumed in processes of changing identity in and through membership
in a community of practitioners; and mastery is an organizational
relational characteristic of communities of practice. (p. 64)

Tempting as it may be to stop at this, we have to recognize that not all learning
requires and demands full participation. Perhaps more appropriate is the usage of
the term 'successful' instead of 'good' learning as we cannot treat an 'accomplished'
learning moment and mastery of the educative event as synonymous with 'good'.
What we can say then is that successful education is a conjoined, agreed-upon
political construct that shifts with the temporality and situatedness of the event.
The question basically then needs to shift from what is 'good' education to when

is 'good' education (Varenne, 2007). Attention is paid to how these ordinary, ubiquitous educative moments are successfully accomplished in the quotidian lives of the individuals and recognition of the conditions that enable these moments. While not trying to discount the unique properties of individuals and environments that make the educative moment, it is the unique co-participation of these properties that make visible different learning and teaching states. As Cremin remarks: Mainstreams, by their very definition, become coercive. In fact, I believe that the richness of the historiography of the past twenty years would be diminished if any particular problematics were to be established as the only problematics. In that domain, as in others, we have no need for 'one best system'. (1988, p. 446)

In terms of locality, this bar is stated as being a 'local haunt' in the Chelsea area. The understanding of what 'local' implies is bounded by who lives in the neighborhood, who frequents the neighborhood, those who come for the Chelsea 'local brand', what is *native* to Chelsea and the like. In other words, 'locality' cannot be a starting point of investigation but that which may gradually unfold as a dimension of what is expected by the participating members engaged with these spaces.
In this case, Chelsea, a Manhattan neighborhood, has its history in high-end housing in the 18th century until the railway was built through it, which by the 1900s became predominantly Irish. During this time, it housed the longshoremen who unloaded freighters at warehouse piers that lined its waterfront. Before World War I, it was the center of the film industry and in the recent few decades this area has become a melting pot of cultures, with a thriving art scene and a gay culture that has manifested itself through fashionable bars, cafes, boutiques, and restaurants while still housing some of the old brick complexes and industrial centers, particularly near its pier. Drawing this back to education, the 'local' worlds of learning and teaching are jointly constructed and inhabited across time and space: 'all human action is joint, partially under the control of many "significant" others—interpreters and enforcers with the power or authority to reconstruct the walls that local activity always damages' (Varenne and McDermott, 1998, p. 14).

In exploring this further through the search for 'best karaoke bars New York' it becomes evident that what makes for a 'common culture' in karaoke bars in New York is indicated by its music collection, number of private rooms available, room cost, and 'ambiance'. To understand 'ambiance' is to understand the process of coconstruction of participants with their environment, that being at the heart of what schooling is about. Taking Cremin's 'deliberation' further, 'ambiance' can be viewed as the conditions that humans work to bring about that allows for more productive, educative work, that of:

... social work, strongly framed and powerfully constrained, and yet open to alternate, possibly unauthorized, activities. It is work that is never done as it continually produces, along with learning, new forms of ignorance. And it is deliberate and deliberative work by all involved ... considering all this as education is mostly likely to preserve the complexity of the work'.

(Varenne, 2007, p. 1559)

While the term connotes a certain static quality, in reality 'ambiance' is as much a formalized social structure as it is an informal process of interaction that organizes it. In the sixth search intended to glance at what else is 'out there' what becomes obvious is the hijacking of karaoke across international domains. Through the Singapore example of the government sanctioning 'the specially widened bar counter, now custom-made for bar-top dancing, a government-sanctioned activity since August 2003', it draws attention to the forces at play from not just within but also from without, shaping the karaoke experience. By architecting the 'bar counter' for 'custom made for bar top dancing', space seems to enable a possibility of particular actions. In a sense, karaoke is not just multi-practices in multiple contexts for multiple purposes; it is a conceptualization of tensions across the spectrum of novelty versus the norm, private versus public, offline versus online, sanctioned versus non-sanctioned and serious versus amateur spaces. Similarly, the complexity of educational spaces in this day and age becomes transparent as spaces transnationalize, globalize, and heterogenize while continuing to be defined and shaped by their locality that is in itself translocal. While this has become endemic in the last two decades of educational scholarship, Cremin in the 1980s brought to attention the transformation of educational endeavors across institutions from:
... informal apprenticeship efforts that affected a few workers over short periods of time into well organized programs that affected millions of workers over extensive periods of time; and the ways in which missionaries, businessmen, philanthropists, and government officials transplanted American educative institutions overseas with varying and frequently ironic outcomes. (1988, p. 444)

This kind of 'popularization, multitudinousness and politicization' (p. 444) are seen by Cremin as the leading characteristics of education, marking some of the most fundamental achievements at the same time as creating some of the most intractable problems. The idea behind this is more to celebrate the range of challenges that this new translocal environment affords to learning and teaching rather than to perceive it as a disruption and threat to the educational fabric.

Part II
The Furniture of space: Architecting Karaoke
This area of Chelsea is mainly residential with the occasional bar and restaurant interspersed, many of them stated as being 'fusion-oriented', particularly Asian, or Italian fusion. The bar is next to *Kobe* , a Japanese furniture designer store. From the outside of the bar, there is a large glass entrance that showcases its customers, yet appears hidden, as you would not have expected it to be there amidst a closed store and apartment complexes. The bar itself is very small, with 6 chairs at the bar counter (see Figure 2) and two separate small round tables at the extreme right corner as you enter the bar, with about four chairs at one table and three at the other. They are all high chairs. There are two plasma TVs, one at the left as soon as you enter the bar facing the tables at the entrance and the other in direct view

of the entrance at the far end of the bar counter. While this public space is rather small, there is a large back space of nine private 'comfortable rooms' to rent, charges based upon the size of the group.

There is a fish tank marking the entrance
to a narrow long passage with private rooms to its left and right. The ambiance at the bar is an interesting mixture of sparseness and intimacy, the former due to its minimalist design of few chairs, non-ornamental designs, and basic yet relatively comfortable chairs; the latter due to the smallness of the bar counter, its curving that allows you to overhear the others at the counter as well as its small side tables at the entrance with warm hues dictating the palette of the place.

Is Karaoke Happening Tonight?
There were two bartenders, both Asian, young, both wearing black; the male was perhaps in his 20s, slim, wearing a black shirt with black ribbed stripes over it, tucked in formal trousers and the woman seemed to be in her 20s too, wearing a black top with a collar and a narrow tight fitting skirt. When we entered, the woman bartender was serving a couple at the counter while the male bartender was leaning against the counter. There was nothing playing on either of the plasma screens. My first thoughts were that the bar may have discontinued karaoke or it was no longer a daily phenomenon as professed on its website. I also thought that maybe I had got my information wrong and that I should have called before coming. I went up to the male bartender and asked him, 'Do you have karaoke?' to which he replied, 'Yes'. I looked around and nothing seemed to be happening so I asked again, this time clarifying my question, 'Is karaoke happening tonight?' and again he responded in the affirmative. So I sat down at the bar and decided to order a drink. My question presupposed that karaoke is an overt event that *happens* at a bar as decided upon by its owners. On the contrary, while the bar provides and creates affordances to perform karaoke, it does not mean that karaoke actually happens. If the participants at the bar choose not to engage in karaoke, karaoke does not happen. Yet, even when 'nothing' is happening, it is still part of the karaoke experience. Much like education, there is a paradox of the initiated, driven by the environment, the absence and presence of instructions that constitute its order. Rather than being a premeditated event, teaching and learning are acts of engagements, disengagements, and mis-engagements with the actors and their environment. Thereby, education is not just that which happens in institutions but also that which is instrumental in the shaping of these institutions that marks its conditions for change (Lankshear, 1987).

Interacting with a Cliché
Two identical files lay on the counter labeled 'Karaoke Songs by Artist'. There were 300 pages of songs arranged under artists alphabetically from A-Z. I noted that amongst all the artists, the widest selection was of the following artists: Elton John, Barbra Streisand, Alan Jackson, Justin Timberlake, Andy Williams, the Beatles, Michael Jackson and Bruce Springsteen. What can one say with such information? This curriculum hints at the 'culture' of the bar, its 'native' quality perhaps as

exemplified by what makes for the most popular in this space. It is tempting to group these singers based on a particular logic; the reputation of Chelsea as a 'gay neighborhood' can compel one to read this curriculum through this singular lens. If employing this strategy, a brief search for gay affiliations of these singers is easily found in which the Beatles, Streisand and Elton John have been claimed as gay icons of the 20th century; Justin Timberlake and Michael Jackson have been wrapped in celebrity gossip as being gay and Bruce Springsteen was applauded for his sympathetic portrayal of a young man dying of AIDS. But what does that tell of karaoke, about the people engaged with karaoke in this space, of the space itself? Labeling in fact has been a persistent and favored preoccupation in education scholarship as it offers a seductive ease in the categorization of learner types and teaching settings. This functionality often serves as a starting point of frenzy in educational politics and policies, of special education, multicultural curriculum to diversity and cultural sensitivity training. With labeling comes resistance in theory and practice as Labov (1972, as cited in Goodwin, 1990) demonstrated effectively in his classic study, challenging the notion that black children were silent. This effort shifted 'silence' as an inherent property of black children to that of a situated accomplishment. Unfortunately, labeling persists as cultural facts, framing human action:

Success and failure like dangerous black maleness, silent Chinese girlishness, and so on and so forth, are categories, scripts, and stage directions that frame joint human action. These labels do not exist for their accuracy but for their powers of evocation, and they must not be confused with the people for whom they may at times be used.
(McDermott & Varenne, 1995, p. 10)

This, the authors argue, informs the culture of education and not the individual. Thereby, the karaoke stereotypes are what is inherited and will frame experiences for the reader and the doer.

However, while such stereotypes are often immediately confronted at the onset of the experience, it is the interaction itself that reveals the character of the educative event. For instance, as I made my way through the songs, a group of five entered the bar. There were two men and three women; one man was Caucasian, blonde, about six feet and muscular, unshaven, dressed casually in a green sweater, jeans and cap while the other was an Asian man, older with a little graying goatee; he wore a black velvet jacket over a black polo neck with black velvet trousers to match and big gold jewelry on his wrists and neck. Two of the women were Caucasian; one very tall, with thin wispy brown hair, wearing a turquoise sleeveless dress; the other wore a plain gray office outfit. The third woman was an Asian woman with red suspenders and jeans. The blonde man sat at the bar while the rest stood talking to each other. He asked the bartender for their best champagne. While he ordered, the Asian man got hold of a microphone and within a minute or two of reaching the place, started to sing *Step Into Christmas* by Elton John. Both plasma screens lit up with visuals of snow on mountain tops. Sanctioned by

the screen and the mike, and initiated by the Asian man and Elton John, the instructing of karaoke had begun.

It is tempting to get wrapped up in interpreting this cliché in action as the triangulation of what is read about the place; that being Chelsea as the gay district, the bar's song selection and a performance act of Elton John by someone wearing velvet. Yet, the focus here is not on the individual *per se* but on the process of interaction between these individuals within this given environment. Rather than looking at how 'being gay' affects and is affected by this interaction, the Schegloff approach is to observe the interaction and see what becomes revealed by this process. If the 'gay' aspect does not manifest itself through this interaction, it is not an affecting factor in our understanding of that act. In schooling, we presuppose that factors like gender, race, class and other 'identities' take over the classroom, and in doing so, we allow for the takeover, leaving behind the actual teaching experience. Rather than starting from that point and reifying that which we believe would impact schooling, we should start by looking at the instructional processes within the teaching acts by students and teachers to instruct our understandings.

Causing 'Trouble' through Clapping: A Garfinkel Moment
The Asian man sang beautifully, perfectly in tune with the song, looking at the plasma screen while singing all along. He maintained a composed stature while singing. The others in the group however continued to chat in the corner, while the Asian woman went through the song list in the book and the blonde man left to use the restroom. When the song finished, the author clapped in acknowledgement of the excellent performance but quickly found herself alone in this act. While we should not presuppose that the clapping behavior is unique, deviant and a signal of non-acceptance in karaoke practice in general, the fact remains that at that moment, it revealed an underlying temporal order of not clapping that was unknown until at the act of clapping. Karaoke has the makings of a 'performance' where it appears to have all the constituents of a performativity of a setting: a singer marked by the mike, an audience, and a 'stage' framed by the plasma screen, song and space around the singer. Yet, this simple act of clapping resists the simplistic translation of other participants as an audience and breaks social norms of a performance act as members within the 'audience' talk during the performance. Another way to look at this is through the lens of status. Perhaps the author's status in this specific setting did not authorize the situation as that of a performance act. Either way, by clapping, a Garfinkel moment of causing trouble is revealed in the misunderstanding of unanimously applying the principles of 'performance' to karaoke; therefore 'all actions as perceived events may have a constitutive structure, and that perhaps it is the threat to the normative order of events as such that is the critical variable in evoking indignation and not the breach of the sacredness of the rules' (Garfinkel, 1963, p. 198). In karaoke then, if there is no audience, can there be a performance? This is the wrong question to ask. By presupposing that 'audience' and 'performance' are fixed categories, much of what characterizes as the richness of interaction would be lost. However, by perceiving these terms as 'modes' of instructional acts, when participants slip into these modes and slip out of them in

particular contexts for specific purposes, we may allow for a better understanding of the karaoke process.

This can be viewed as encouraging in the school context as evaluative measures, however omniscient, are not always exercised for judgment. Given that no act is an act of isolation, tremendous social effort goes into organizing the politics of teaching and learning, of deciding which moments to pay attention to, moments to test oneself, of one another and the group as a whole; which moments to pay heed to authority, to play to the expectations of the authorized, to succumb, resist, transform and circumvent the rules of the classroom. This complexity of action involves learners posturing according to the task at hand, carefully monitoring each other and themselves, appearing effortless in their (a)synchronized behaviors as they go about relating to one another, and only sometimes judgmentally so (McDermott *et al* ., 1978).

Shortly after the Asian man's song, the Asian woman poised to sing *Howdy* by Monty Harper, sang it completely off key and at times she even misread some of the words in the lyrics. In the middle of her singing, the group burst into loud laughter. At the tail end of her song, she became more 'performative', in a sense that she began to sing the song as if she were on stage with the flaying of the arms, bobbing her head up and down and at the end of the song, she took a bow before her group, *converting* them into an audience. In turn, she was applauded. So here, her caricature of a performance succeeded in facilitating a response that demanded clapping as part of the 'scene' of the play. Yet, we cannot presuppose that in caricaturing the performance of singing, the act of clapping is in itself a staged process. Rather, it could be an acknowledgement of her 'bad' performance that made it good karaoke; it could be her attempt to draw attention to herself through this process that was granted a genuine acknowledgement or perhaps it was her allowing for the irreverence of the space by opening up karaoke for a wider kind of singing. Either way, it is important to recognize these acts as instructional modes that inform us and at times alter the 'rules of the game' of the event at hand. So clapping *per se* is not outside the rules of the game but rather its employment in specific instances, sometimes staged, unstaged or both, that evoke the normalization within the event.

One need only look at a typical classroom practice to see the orchestrated arrangements that are performed cooperatively by students and teachers alike: enactments of raising one's hand to answer a question, of taking notes when the teacher talks, of looking at the teacher when classroom is being 'performed' and sitting in rows and attending to the bell as an acknowledgement of the start and end of this educative performance. At times this performance can be dangerously cooperative as in McDermott's Rosa who colludes with the teacher in learning not to read (McDermott & Tylbor, 1983) to threatening as in buying into the 'pathology' of urban youth in current educational practice (Giroux, 1997). Performance or not, the show does go on.

Whose Turn Is It Now? Mediating Agents and the Mediated

Karaoke is mediated by a combination of plasma screens, the bartenders and mikes. To sing a song, you have to write the song's title and your name on a piece of paper along with its bar code from the 'Songs by Artist' files on the bar counter. You hand the request to the bartender and pay him/her $2 per song. To know your turn, you have to look at the bottom of the plasma screen where it lists the song titles by number. This way you can see where you 'stand in line' for singing and track its progress as the song moves toward the number one position. At this site, the bartenders did not call out anyone's name even though they take your name down. Also, the bartenders did not instruct people to hand over the mike to the assigned singer. It seemed to happen automatically, naturally, casually. Also, there is an informal sanctioning of staring at people as they sing without it being considered rude. Here, one can say, the Garfinkel trouble is caused by not gaining any reaction by staring.

Interestingly, while it appears that there are clear mediating agents authorizing the singer here, in actuality it seems more fluid and at times mere ceremony. For instance, after the completion of a song, the blonde man asked no one in particular, 'It's my turn. Where is the mike?' The Asian woman handed him the mike. He then moved towards the plasma screen at the entrance where there was space and bent down on his knees in front of the screen and sang *Happy Days* by Normal Gimbel and Charles Fox. Within seconds, the three women surrounded him and provided a backdrop for the song like chorus girls. Interestingly, while this unfolded, the Asian man got hold of a second mike and sang to this song looking at the screen situated at the other end of the counter. He did not look at the blonde man to coordinate his singing. While they did not coordinate through gestures and eye contact, the lyrics highlighted in karaoke fashion set the pace of the singing and thereby allowed for cooperative singing.

The next song chosen was Michael Jackson's *Beat It.* It was unclear as to who requested the song. Yet, this did not deter the people at the bar, as when the song started, everyone chimed in. The blonde man held onto the mike while the Asian woman got the second mike from the Asian man. While it makes sense to infer that the person who has the mike is the person who requested the song, the presence of two mikes blurs the 'ownership' aspect. Yet this does not seem to be an issue in karaoke, considering that the very affordance of the two mikes tells of the expected lack of emphasis on one individual 'owning' the song through the singing of it. When the song finished, the blonde man announced to all 'Excellent work', 'Good job', patting others, but it was said more in a mock authority fashion. Again, no one clapped.

Mediation is given tremendous importance in schooling where markers are looked for to allow for the sharing of common sense notions of the status of individuals and institutions within an event. There is much emphasis in teaching children about these markers, as a strategem of democratic education. Educational bureaucracy has perfected the capturing of markers through its incessant tabulation of scores, demographics, race, gender and other categories deemed as access markers for

learning. Who gets in, who gets out, which child got left behind, and which child moved ahead is seen as critical information to help in the mediating process within the educational system. There is a deep fear that if these children are not well versed in these mediating tools, be it the essential multicultural curriculum for the 21st century as touted by scholars such as Hirsch, high end technology access and usage in the classroom as professed by Friedman, global exposure, counseling or the like, there would be a danger of lagging behind. While these are pertinent concerns, there is often too much emphasis on institutions shaping the individual and less on the deliberative work within these institutions that, according to Cremin, is what true learning is about. Cremin's need is for the 'educational biography' to be less of an imprint of institutions and more on its configurations with other institutions and individuals (1988, p. 436).

In delving into mediating agents and agencies, it is natural to think of Bourdieu's 'habitus', a highly influential and much cited concept that makes simple the complexity of such institutional efforts. Bourdieu looks at schools as strategic social organizations that foster a set of mental habits or habitus, condemning people to a vicious cycle of social reproduction of inequality. Thereby, mediating tools such as curriculum, instruction, and other social, psychological, physical, and cultural resources are seen as strategic markers that are differentiated to constitute a hierarchy of learning and teaching. However, as Varenne (2007) rightly points out,
... where Cremin traced the diachronic transformation of the school and its contexts, Bourdieu emphasized the synchronic 'arbitrariness' of schooling as method for moving the young into adult positions within the polity. He also emphasized the violence that must accompany the imposition of any culture on a new population of human beings. He analyzed schooling as a set of relationships among controlled and controlling agents (teachers, parents, students). These agents of the school use particular methodologies (pedagogies), rely on specific forms of authority (to teach and to evaluate), and themselves depend on particular forms of legitimacy.

On the other hand, Cremin did not hypothesize the sharing of habits, for nothing stayed habitual for long. His concern was with co-participation within shifting fields, and the consequences of such co-participation. (p. 1569)
Thereby, in accepting these markers by itself as representative of the nature of social order, one can be mislead on its actual function in the dynamic process of interaction. What needs to be looked at is how these markers get appropriated, transformed, shaped, and played with in the making of meaning through teaching and learning.

Michael Jackson as Common Cultural Capital
Immediately after *Beat It* , another song by Michael Jackson began—
Billy Jean. Again, everyone started to sing, some softly by themselves while others were more animated. The mikes were still in the hands of the blonde man and the Asian woman. However, they could barely be heard as the collective voice of everyone

masked their individual voices on the mikes. When it came to the chorus line, '... but the kid is not my son' everyone screamed the lyrics aloud in tandem. By no means is this common correspondence a breach of social order. Rather, this act can be seen as a manifestation of a unifying quality of certain cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) within this game that serves as an overt marker for what Garfinkel states as '"what anyone knows" i.e. a pre-established corpus of socially warranted knowledge' amongst 'a commonly entertained scheme of communication consisting of a standardized system of signals and coding rules' (Garfinkel, 1963, p. 215). In the process of schooling, these are fortunate teaching moments that need to be paid heed to where the signaling of what is common is made overt, allowing the teacher into a shared social fact.

Who Can Do Karaoke?
At the tail end of a song, the Asian man and the tall girl engaged in a conversation; 'Anyone who wears red shoes like that should be able to sing karaoke' he commented, smiling at her. 'Maybe you should sing' she said in a pleading tone. 'I have no one to sing to except to the scientist' he laughed, pointing to the blonde man sitting at the counter. While they were immersed in conversation, the song *I Have A Dream* started. The blonde man looked around and started to talk to a man sitting next to him; 'where are you from?' 'Ireland' the man said; 'Ah, you got to sing this song man' the blonde man said; 'Dude, I suck' the man responded to which the blonde man replied, 'I have a house in Limerick, the Irish are the best at karaoke' he exclaimed, handing over the mike to the man at the counter; 'Why Limerick?' to which the blonde man responded 'not really sure' and with that left to talk to his friends. This arbitrariness of who can sing karaoke is telling as it spans from those who 'wears red shoes' to those who are 'Irish'. Given that karaoke is not a performance unless deliberately so and bad karaoke is part of good karaoke, the participants sanction through this arbitrary rule one and all to sing karaoke. The obvious stretch here is that learning is but an act of ordinariness in concert with others through systematic, deliberative play. This takes us back to the earlier pontifications on what makes for 'good' education, embracing accomplishment while acknowledging the hierarchy, or better yet, politics of learning: who can participate, when and where. Thereby, the focus is not on the property of the individual, on who can or cannot learn but on what enables educative practice.

I Can't Do Barbra
A Barbra Streisand song *People* started to play. The Asian woman holding the mike at this point said 'I can't do Barbra' and gestured to hand over the mike to anyone who wanted to sing this song. The mike passed hands until it found itself resting on the counter, unclaimed. All through the song, both mikes remained unused. This incident is telling for while bad karaoke is good karaoke and there are no constraints on the 'quality of the performance' within the rules of the karaoke 'game', the constraints in this case come from the participants themselves as they confront a song that cannot be mocked at nor be sung well due to its difficult pitches and tonal variances; after all, it is Barbra Streisand. While it may appear that karaoke has fluid boundaries, there are still boundaries to mockery, to entertainment,

to play, as the self dictates how far within these boundaries it is willing to go. The notion of impossibility is as much a construct as it is a social fact. The nurturing of negatively valued identities as Lave (Lave & Wenger, 1991) points out, when for instance a child states that 'I don't do math', or 'I can't spell', is the work of larger social formations in which the practice is situated. These larger interspersed communities are often sustained political efforts across time and space that work hard at reproducing their conditions, oppressive as they may be. Thereby, while learning is ordinary and omnipresent as mentioned earlier, it becomes more 'impossible' the closer it becomes to being sacred. It's what we constantly address in the educational world as 'gatekeepers', one such being the Ivy Leagues, the stuff of legends birthed in the United States and prolonged through its priesthood by a wide transnational array of agencies, individuals, families, schools, libraries, media, and artifacts, gilding its 'impossibility' for generations to come.

Alternative Scripts at the Same Time

The blonde man went to the counter and asked the bartender for another bottle of champagne. The woman bartender asked if it was possible to pay his bill at that point as she had to leave. He said he preferred to do it later. She then pressed on 'What about the tip?' she asked, to which he replied 'I'll give it later'. She persisted, 'I'd appreciate it if you can do it now'. He looked serious and reiterated in a firm manner, 'I'll leave it later'. She looked at her watch, looked at him and went about opening his bottle. This dialogue serves as a reminder that alternative scripts interact constantly within a certain space, and while the status of the bartender as mediator in the song selection was high, as a service provider of drinks it is compromised, and as in this case 'put in place' by someone with a higher status. As Garfinkel observes,... no rule has been proposed that would restrict in any but an eclectic commonsense way the set of alternative responses. For example, for each alternative that I might select it is necessary that I assume something about the kind of relationship that I have with the person. If it is proposed that he is a status superior, then one might be inclined to 'predict' a different reply on my part that if he is a close friend. (p. 217)

While insulated from certain norms, an event continues to be weaved into other narratives of income, status, power that are exercised on a regular basis. Schooling is no different. In the game of apprenticeship as Lave (1996) argues, the outcome of years of teaching and learning, as in the case of a school, produce many complex 'lessons' at once, besides the endorsed curriculum. In other words, a child learns not just the staple diet of content prescribed by the State, s/he learns how to navigate across boundaries of agents and agencies. Thereby, the learning of status, ethnicity, gender, social divisions, peer group identities, success and failure run parallel and are often given greater importance than the acquisition of knowledge.

The One Who Cannot Sing ... Sings

At the start of the night, there was a couple at the counter, a young skinny

Caucasian man in a gray suit and a petite Asian woman in a burgundy dress who sat at the corner of the bar, drinking sake and going over the songs from the book. Yet all through the night, they did not sing a single song. At the start when her partner offered the Asian woman the mike, she giggled and protested that she could not sing. After four hours, by the tail end of the night, the song *Take On Me* by A-ha started to play. The couple, particularly the woman who claimed 'I cannot sing' became highly animated. While the man continued to sit, she stood up and sang, shaking her hips to the song and singing louder than him. It was 1:30 am. Evidently while space is a factor in impacting interaction, time is also a factor; what people can and cannot do is not intrinsic of their nature but rather what they are capable of doing at a point in time in that space through a given context. This is perhaps the prime lesson of a schooling moment, the dynamism of instruction that reflects the act and not the actor. Any actor can become a singer and in choosing to be, widens the parameters of what a singer can be. In looking at barriers to and within schooling, we must not forget that while these 'walls' can be daunting and oppressive, these structures are after all the product of human effort.

Clearly the participants are not absolutely constrained by the wall any more than the builders were constrained by the stones. Participants may even be able to tear it down, but they cannot ignore it. The wall is external to them, it precedes them, and as they run into it, it is imposed on them. It is, in brief, a 'social fact' in the most classical sense: It was 'facted' by a social group. (Varenne & McDermott, 1998, p. 180)

Conclusion

Karaoke as a metaphor for educational practice is appropriate particularly because of its irreverence to the subject at hand and its obvious disassociation from schooling. We as educators are in constant need of a reminder of what to make of the song, the singer and the singing as we try to lead by way of understanding what is needed to allow the educational process to unfold. But as we can see, while intentions are noble, the richness of instructions are often lost in the efforts at orchestrating all participants of education to sing the same song at the same time within the same space, oblivious of the fact that regardless of the teacher hijacking the mike, the students will continue to interrupt, sing, and pause, at times choosing to be the audience and then, more often than not, choosing to be the singer, mockingly and un-mockingly.

Notes

1. Yahoogroups for karaoke performers; Retrieved on June 21, 2007 from Web site: http://karaoke.meetup.com/cities/us/ny/jackson_heights/
2. Jackson Heights: Retrieved on June 21, 2007 from Web site: http://queens.about.com/cs/

neighborhoods/a/jackson_heights.htm

3. Neighborhood of Chelsea, New York: Retrieved on June 21, 2007 from Web site: http://nymag.com/realestate/articles/neighborhoods/chelsea.htm

4. Reviews of Karaoke One 7: Retrieved on June 21, 2007 from Web site: http://newyork.citysearch.com/review/41333364

5. See Whyte, 2007.

6. Karaoke bars in Singapore: Retrieved on June 21, 2007 from Web site: http://travel2.nytimes.com/top/features/travel/destinations/asia/singapore/entertainment_listings.html

7. See pictures and prices of renting rooms in Karaoke One 7: Retrieved on June 21, 2007 from Web site: http://www.karaoke17.com/html/price.html

8. Elton John—*Steps into Christmas*: Retrieved on June 21, 2007 from Web site: http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=2548

9. Schegloff emphasized attributing meaning to action based on the interaction at hand versus the larger discourses that enveloped it. See Schegloff, 1991.

10. *Howdy* by Monty Harper: Lyrics: Retrieved on June 21, 2007 from Web site: http://www.montyharper.com/Songs/HS.html

11. *Happy Days* lyrics: Retrieved on June 21, 2007 from Web site: http://www.sitcomsonline.com/themesonglyrics.html

12. *Billy Jean* lyrics: Retrieved on June 21, 2007 from Web site: http://www.lyricsfreak.com/m/michael+jackson/billie+jean_20092703.html

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