

## Introduction

*Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions.*

(HELLER 46)

Perhaps no novel has better captured the absurdities of life in a highly bureaucratized society than Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. Indeed, though the novel is primarily concerned with exposing the incompatible logics that structure military experience, the phrase "Catch-22" has since become shorthand for *any* bureaucratic situation that places one at the mercy of intertwined but mutually exclusive lines of reasoning. As the common currency of this term suggests, "the catch" names an essential characteristic of modern life, as everyone is shown, at one time or another, to be vulnerable to the whims of a baroque and wholly incoherent power structure. There is no escape; there is always, as Heller insists throughout his novel, a catch.

Shortly after I graduated from college, I became entangled in one such "catch," when a major research university, which had just rejected me both from its doctoral program in English and its master's program in creative writing, turned around and hired me to teach in its college for remedial students. One moment the university was telling me, "You aren't qualified to study here," and the next it was saying, "But we're glad to have you teach here." My inability to make sense of the university's actions was compounded by my belief that my credentials made it clear that I was well prepared to go on being a student and quite ill prepared to commence being a teacher. Indeed, that I was even considered for the position of learning skills specialist seemed nonsensical, since I didn't meet any of the "minimum re-

quirements” listed in the university’s job announcement. Rather than the three years of teaching experience called for, I had none. Rather than the requested master’s degree in science, I had a B.A. in the liberal arts. And, perhaps most important, not only was I unqualified to run the study skills workshops that were to be the centerpiece of the job, I was actually wholly ignorant of the fact that there were *strategies* for taking tests, for reading textbooks, for organizing lecture notes. Like most people, I thought everyone went about this work in pretty much the same way and that some people were just better at it than others. It never occurred to me that study skills could or should be taught.

Thus, while the position of learning skills specialist in math and science required the ability to assist remedial students in mastering the study skills central to success at a large university, I had no firsthand experience with the skills my students needed to master or of the educational system they had to navigate. Instead, my undergraduate experience had come at a small liberal arts college where the classes were run exclusively as tutorials, where the shared objective was understood to be ongoing engagement in the discussion of the Great Books, and where the business of assigning grades was treated as a peripheral matter, a mere formality. While my shortcomings in these areas seemed to me sufficient cause for disqualifying me from further consideration, for my future employer, suddenly understaffed late in the summer, the obvious weaknesses in my application were insignificant instances of “content deficit,” which could be corrected with a little reading. And so, when my boss concluded the interview by handing me the job, I gave myself over to the rich contradictions that institutional life so dependably provides.

At one point in *Catch-22*, Yossarian, the novel’s protagonist, reacts to the contradictory demands that have been placed on him by removing his clothes and taking to the trees. Yossarian’s symbolic return to a “natural state” prior to the creation of human society is short-lived, of course, but it is indicative of Yossarian’s overwhelming desire to place himself on the farthest fringes of the military establishment. Indeed, Yossarian’s enduring appeal surely resides in his limitless talent for devising ways to reduce his own active involvement in the war effort to an absolute minimum. One could even argue that Yossarian transcends the absurdities that surround him and salvages his own integrity by steadfastly maintaining a state of ironic detachment. At the same time, though, one could argue just as convincingly that the novel amply, if inadvertently, documents the ultimate futility of Yossarian’s favored mode of resistance. After all, while Yossarian does manage to keep his superiors guessing by shuttling back and forth between crit-

ical resignation and social withdrawal, he never succeeds in escaping or altering his conditions of constraint.

Within the world of Heller's novel, we clearly are meant to believe that given the power Yossarian's superiors had over his life, there was little else he could do. And, by extension, it is certainly tempting to read Yossarian's plight as an expression of the more general modern condition: like Yossarian, we are helpless and vulnerable; like Yossarian, we have only our humor and our wry observations to distinguish us from those wholly at the mercy of the systems of oppression that dominate our lives. The problem with seeing Yossarian as Everyman, though, is that Yossarian resides in a total institution, where the hierarchical relations among members are rigorously policed and each member's actions are subject to continuous and potentially endless review. For those who aren't in the military or in prison, there are other, more productive ways of responding to the constraining conditions of life in a bureaucracy than sinking into ironic detachment. Most of us have other options available to us, and my specific concern in the chapters that follow is to show what some of these options have been for those dissatisfied with that other major bureaucratic institution of social control—the academy.

There are, of course, very sound reasons for seeing the world of higher education as a jumble of meaningless contradictions that can never be changed or understood. One need only point to the long and venerable tradition of declaring one educational crisis after another to see that willed ignorance about the bureaucratic intricacies of life in the academy is often understood to be both a virtue and a sign of elevated intelligence. But, to stand apart from the academy like Yossarian in the trees in order to express shock and outrage at its manifest absurdities and injustices does little or nothing to change the day-to-day workings of this bureaucratic machine. An alternative approach, which I rely on throughout this book, is to seek out the logics that lie at the heart of local incarnations of the educational enterprise. Thus, to return for a moment to my opening example, the apparent contradiction in the university's decision to employ me as a teacher rather than admit me as a student can be disentangled by recognizing that universities have one set of standards for those it deems possible members of the future professoriate and another set for those it aims to hire to work with students on the lowest rungs of the academy. The apparent disjunction between this particular university's admissions process and its hiring practice is actually a straightforward reflection of the division of labor in the academy more generally, where marginal students get help from "marginal" academics and graduate students are permitted access to "the best" the uni-

versity has to offer. In this case, then, disentangling the university's contradictory actions serves to expose the strictly coherent organizational logic governing the university's use of human resources. Like to like.

While I hope to show in the pages that follow how efforts to reform educational practice have been shaped and distorted by the widespread belief in the academy's ability to reliably sort people into the "right" categories, I don't mean to suggest by this that maintaining such a belief is an easy task. To the contrary, those who accept the idea that "the best" teachers are to be found at "the best" schools working with "the best" students are inevitably driven to endow the academy and its bureaucratic instruments with almost magical powers of prescience—powers that enable administrators and teachers to know who belongs where and which disciplinary sectors need to be policed more rigorously than others at any given time. In practice, though, what finally matters most is not that this system for sorting the nation's undifferentiated masses into a hierarchy of credentialed citizens operate fairly, but only that it generate hierarchical relations and the logics that support them, including a belief in the possibility of accurate placement. Of course, with so many students and so little time, the academy cannot, in fact, "know" much at all about any of the individuals it has placed here or there, up or down, in or out, beyond what can be learned from test scores, transcripts, a personal statement, a writing sample, a few letters of recommendation.

In the three years I served as a learning skills specialist in math and science in the university's remedial two-year college, I came to see just how little one can learn from such data. Although the students I worked with had been sorted to the bottom of the university, they bore little resemblance to the ill-prepared, unruly, and underprivileged kids one might have been led to expect would be found residing in this holding tank for the American Dream. Indeed, while my own sense of entitlement had led me, somewhat foolishly, to expect a smoother ride to advanced study, the students I tutored felt equally entitled (equally foolishly, I would say) to expect academic success simply because they had paid for it. They were not, in short, the kind of students who automatically evoked a sympathetic response. Instead, more often than not, they were highly privileged underachievers, most of whom didn't excel in school because success in this realm simply didn't matter to them. But though they often came to the university either uninterested in or alienated by the educational process, they learned soon enough that they should be ashamed of the fact that they had been placed in what other students referred to as "The Coulda Been Something School," "The Coloring Book School," and "The Charlie Brown School." Once exposed to these taunts, the students quickly came to feel that what mattered

most was getting out of this remedial eddy and back into the mainstream where all the other, “normal” students were to be found.

It was not, on its face, an ideal teaching situation. But, as I will argue in the following chapters, there are *no* ideal teaching situations, because all institutionalized learning occurs under conditions shaped by contingencies beyond the control of any of the individual actors. This fact is the source of nearly all the frustrations that teachers voice about life in the classroom: “If only I had better students, fewer administrative demands, smaller classes, fewer preparations, more time for my own research, a higher salary, then I could do my job,” teachers say. Indeed, one of the abiding paradoxes of the teaching profession is that those who work under conditions that are anything but free endlessly sing the praises of education’s emancipatory powers. Thus teachers, dreaming that life must be better somewhere else, teach their students to dream this same dream. In my case, this paradox was sharpened all the more by the fact that I was proffering “the emancipatory possibilities of critical thinking” to students who could, and did, escape the demands of studying by spending a long weekend in Cancun or Aruba, winter break in the Swiss Alps, summers sunning on islands in the Aegean.

And yet, however much I might have been repelled by the lives of privilege that many of these students led, it was also quite clear to me that few of them were being well served by the education they were receiving at my college. To begin with, the students were primarily taught by a transient, visibly disenchanted junior faculty who were always actively and openly seeking employment elsewhere; the students were presented with a common curriculum that each teacher was required to follow; the instruction they received was almost exclusively in the lecture format, frequently when they were massed together in groups of four hundred; and finally, nearly all of the students’ learning was assessed through multiple-choice exams. The most obvious problem with this approach is its striking resemblance to the pedagogical practice that the students had encountered—and failed to learn under—in high school. For those students who sought the assistance of the learning skills staff, there was an additional problem: everything they heard in their classes seemed to emphasize the idea that the right answer was the most important part of learning, but once they entered the Learning Skills Center, they found tutors less interested in the right answer than in the process of coming to know. This battle between method and content, deep understanding and surface learning, is a commonplace of academic life, of course. And, in this case, the students and the support staff found themselves pitted against one another, with each side feeling the other couldn’t see what being successful in the academy required. It was also a

battle that both students and the learning skills specialists were certain the teachers would win, since the teachers wielded the grades and thus were understood to control access to the “real” university just beyond the walls of our remedial college.

Although we all succumbed, from time to time, to the temptation to cast “the teachers” as the real enemies of education, we knew that, in this instance, the teachers actually exercised very little control over the content of the courses they taught or the grades their students received. In the science course with which I was involved, for example, the final grade given to a particular student in the course was not a reflection of any single teacher’s decisions; rather the final grade reflected that student’s averaged results on a multiple-choice midterm and final exam collaboratively produced by all the science faculty. Once these exams were electronically scanned and the scores collated, the averages for each class were placed on a graph so that the performance of the different instructors could be readily compared. These averages were, in turn, interpreted as evidence showing which teachers had veered from or failed to cover the prescribed curriculum and which ones had stuck to schedule: high scores equaled good teaching, low scores equaled bad teaching. Like to like. In this system, for a teacher to teach away from the prescribed curriculum was a kind of folly that had unambiguous material consequences: such actions produced documented evidence of “poor” teaching; complaints from students and parents about inferior instruction would follow; a meeting with the department chair and the dean would occur; a decision not to renew the contract of the teacher in question would be reached. This drama regularly played itself out during my time at the college; one new faculty member after another, disillusioned by the disparity between the life the academy had seemed to promise and one it actually provided, would respond by setting out to teach whatever it was he or she wanted in whatever way seemed appropriate. The results were invariable.

When I finally understood how the administration and the curriculum worked in tandem to constrict the faculty’s actions in these ways, I realized how oddly fortunate I was to be tinkering along the margins of the academy in an institutional space that almost no one of importance took an interest in. Although my own encounters with the students were certainly constrained, as I’ve already suggested, I did have a measure of freedom unavailable to those faculty members in the higher-paying, more visible positions. While they had to plod along in the traces of the assigned curriculum, I could structure my courses around the needs of whoever happened to attend my classes; I could focus on fundamental concepts that the lecture se-

ries had long ago left behind; I could spend an entire period on one word problem; I could help the students generate questions about a field of study that, from their vantage point, seemed concerned only with answers. Furthermore, since my classes were all voluntary, I had to deal only with students who wanted to work with me—students who were motivated to succeed but who, for one reason or another, couldn't translate this desire into something their teachers could see or understand. And what I learned from these students was that they were all deeply ashamed of their need for help and that many of them felt "the system" had it in for them. They knew their failure was inevitable: it was only a matter of time. If only, they would tell me, they had had a different teacher, a different assignment, a different family. If only they had gone to a better school, had tried harder, had taken the test on a different day. If only things were not the way they were, then they would be different.

In this environment, each and every one of us—the teachers, the support staff, and the students—felt misplaced and trapped by a set of institutional circumstances that we could only dream of escaping. And, as I have since made my way through graduate school and on into the profession as a faculty member, I have found that students are not alone in being trapped by the fanciful notion that learning occurs only under conditions of absolute freedom: that assumption often renders us, their teachers, unprepared to respond to the array of material, cultural, and institutional constraints that both define and confine all learning situations. In other words, for every student who says, "I could have written a really excellent paper if my teacher had let me choose my own topic," there's an educator ready to proclaim at a faculty meeting, "It's an outrage that this administration is treating education as if it were a business," and someone else in support services complaining, "All the faculty cares about is product, not process." In each arena, the parties imagine an alternative, free space where a different kind of learning and teaching might go on; and in more cases than not, this utopian space is deployed to justify the speaker's own nonperformance or political ineffectiveness in the fallen world of the academy.

In an intellectual environment populated by such utopian visions, it is clear enough that the administrator's pragmatic decisions can only appear as a form of deviance—as the way of those who have fallen out of favor with sweet Reason. Or to put it another way, because the academy's central concern is with the production of critique, everyone in the system can be counted on to detail why whatever can be done is not, in fact, what should or must be done. Heller's send-up of the military works within this tradition, exhausting itself in the work of repeatedly exposing the absurdities

and the horrors one must simultaneously acknowledge and disavow to participate in organized society. But however successful Heller may be at making the contradictions of bureaucratic life available to be read, the novel itself never offers a sense of how one might or should act in light of its critique; beyond resigning oneself to the impossibility of meaningful change, it is unclear what one is being invited to do.

Though despair of this kind can be quite reassuring to those who have decided to retire from the world of social action, in the chapters that follow I will be concerned to focus on a very different line of response to the discontinuities, disappointments, and disturbances that define life in the academy. Concentrating on the question of what changes are possible or desirable for those employed in the academy, I look in detail at past efforts to reform educational practice. And, perhaps because I am keenly aware of the ways in which my own circuitous route through the academy has brought me to this project, I have made every effort in what follows to stress how profoundly local educational practices and possibilities are shaped by local constraints. For this reason, I have not set out to reveal some master pattern in the deep structure of the past that inexorably expresses itself across time in movements to reform the academy; nor have I argued for a national revision of standards, modes of assessment, or plans for teacher training that can and should be applied here as well as there; nor finally have I suggested some ludic approach that will allow us all, à la Dr. Strangelove, to stop worrying and start loving the contradictions afforded by bureaucratic life. Critical research on education and calls for educational reform tend to sound the battle cry in these ways, but as the history of educational reform amply illustrates, a mountain of similarly hortatory educational tracts have left no real traces in the world beyond the paper on which they were written.

With this fact firmly in mind, I have insisted on seeing every educational program as being the product of a series of complex, contradictory, compromised, and contingent solutions whose permanence is never assured. And, as the following analyses of particular programs show, this approach reveals that any bureaucratic decision about who should receive an education, in what form, at what cost, and to what end is susceptible, over time, to considerable—if slow-moving—revision. Indeed, by attending to the play between the policy statements and the enacted pedagogical practices of the administrators, curricular planners, teachers, and students, one finds a place where individuals acting alone and collectively have an opportunity to express their agency, albeit in the highly restricted realm of relative freedom. In other words, while the critique of educational practice sets out to highlight the limits of any given bureaucratic arrangement, the historical

approach I employ here begins with the assumption that such bureaucratic limits are ultimately inescapable and moves on to a consideration of what has been thought possible under the less-than-ideal conditions educators have inevitably faced, where there has been and always will be a slippage between the worlds that can be created in words and the worlds lived in by real people.

In my case, the slippage between the world suggested by the want ad I responded to more than a decade ago—a world of credentials, experience, expertise—and the pressing reality of my employer’s need for someone to staff a suddenly vacated position was fortunate: it permitted me to join in a discussion and a kind of labor from which, at another time, I might have been excluded or from which I might have excluded myself. The results certainly could have been otherwise. Indeed, as we will see in the chapters that follow, the very impossibility of either planning for or protecting against such contingencies is *the* defining condition of work in the academy. While this fact is often presented as the occasion for despair, I will argue that meaningful intervention in the business of higher education becomes possible only after the constraining forces that shape local labor practices are acknowledged. That is, it’s easy enough to put together a reform proposal, but actually seeing any of the proposed changes through requires anticipating and responding to, among other things, the reigning discourses of fiscal crisis, the expressed needs and abilities of resident student and faculty populations, mandated controls over class size and course load, and the physical plant’s available facilities. Of course, to relocate the discussion of education’s “emancipatory powers” on such seemingly mundane grounds is to suggest that teaching is not and never has been an activity free of material constraint. It is also to recognize that denying, bemoaning, or critiquing this state of affairs does little to affect prevailing working conditions or to improve the delivery of a meaningful educational experience for undergraduates. But as we will see, there are many ways to work within extant constraints to modify both the form and content of higher education. Indeed, if the history of educational reform may be made to teach us a lesson, it is this—that sustainable educational ventures have always worked *within* local, material constraints and that, more often than not, they have papered over their involvement in such bureaucratic matters with rhetorics that declare education’s emancipatory powers. To pursue educational reform is thus to work in an impure space, where intractable material conditions always threaten to expose rhetorics of change as delusional or deliberately deceptive; it is also to insist that bureaucracies don’t simply impede change: they are the social instruments that make change possible.