

# **Monsters in the Classroom**

Noam Chomsky, Human Nature, and Education

**Philip G. Hill**

**Series in Education**



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I dedicate this book to my two children, Christopher and Bianca. Please accept the words in this manuscript as an expression of the honour and privilege it is for me to be part of your lives.

*Yet I do not know what gifts of mine could more aptly repay yours - though my greatest gifts could never repay yours, for they cannot be equalled by any barren gratitude of futile words.*

John Milton

I also dedicate this book to my wife, Rosa Maria Cepeda, for her endless encouragement and constant support.

And finally, I dedicate this book to the memory of Plata and Darwin, my two truly loyal companions.



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# List of Acronyms

EST	Extended Standard Theory
FLB	Faculty of Language - Broad Sense
FLN	Faculty of Language - Narrow Sense
FLS	Functional Language System
GB	Government Binding
HCF	Hauser, Chomsky, Fitch paper
LP	Locality Principle
LSLT	The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
MP	Minimalist Program
P&P	Principles and Parameters
SLORC	State and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
TGG	Transformational Generative Grammar
UG	Universal Grammar





# Foreword

It is a great honor to be asked to write this foreword for *Monsters in the Classroom: Noam Chomsky, Human Nature, and Education*. I thoroughly enjoyed reading Phillip Hill's book and hope you will gain insight from his analysis as I have. As a lifelong educator and Noam Chomsky follower, I am grateful to have read such a thoughtful overview of his life, linguistic work, and political views. But Phillip Hill's analysis of how Noam Chomsky's work relates to education is what makes this book a notable contribution to the educational field.

I originally learned of Noam Chomsky in the early 1980s when I took a language development class as part of my special education teacher preparation program. Though I was well-versed in behavioral learning theories, I believed there was something more magical about how naturally children learn language. So, it was validating to learn of Chomsky's view that language development draws from more than imitation and reinforcement. As Phillip Hill describes, Noam Chomsky believes linguistics are tied to human nature and evidence of our innate creativity.

Noam Chomsky is considered one of the greatest intellectuals of our time, yet a controversial figure for his linguistic and political views. It is this controversy that kept my interest in Chomsky's work while I pursued my own career in education, first as a teacher, then a professor of education, for over forty years. In 2013, I was asked to write a chapter about a critical pedagogue in James Kirylo, "A Critical Pedagogy of Resistance: 34 Pedagogues We Need to Know." Even though Noam Chomsky was my first and only choice, it was incredibly difficult to condense so much information into only five pages. Though I tried my best to do the man justice, I always regretted that I was so limited in exploring Noam Chomsky's impact on education.

So, this book is close to the one I would have liked to have written. I am especially jealous that Hill got the opportunity to interview Noam Chomsky, which is included at the end of the book. Phillip Hill did an excellent job describing Chomsky as a person, his linguistic theories, his political views, and how his works can be applied to education. In fact, the pedagogy Hill developed based on Chomsky's views shares similarities with the evidence-based CREDE Pedagogy and project-based and service learning I have utilized in my own classrooms for decades. Like Hill, I recognize that students who are free to construct their own learning, when given opportunities and support,

can have transformational experiences even in our currently flawed, over-encumbered schools.

Despite the development of standardized teaching and learning systems, we are fortunate for the creative teachers who subvert these systems to encourage more authentic learning. I believe our focus within schools should be to support creativity, teach critical thinking, and actively model problem solving with our students. From the examples provided, it is apparent that Phillip Hill is a wonderful teacher who creates learning experiences that can empower students to reach human potential beyond the standard curriculum. These transformational experiences should be what all educators strive to accomplish. I hope you enjoy reading Phillip Hill's pedagogical journey and can apply it to your own understanding of educational practice.

Sincerely,

Janna Siegel Robertson, Ph.D.  
Professor Emerita, University of North Carolina, Wilmington

# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Noam Chomsky for finding the time, many years ago, to meet with me, and, more recently, to review parts of my manuscript and provide constructive criticism. I would also like to thank Professor Janna Siegel Robertson for her insightful and extremely generous foreword to the manuscript. In addition, I would like to express my gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers of my manuscript for offering me valuable commentary. Similarly, I would like to acknowledge the generosity of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives for granting me permission to include in the manuscript my published conversation with Noam Chomsky. Likewise, I would like to thank my editors at Vernon Press - Blanca Caro, Javier Rodriguez, and Argiris Legatos - for their generosity and constant support. And finally, I would like to thank all the students I had the privilege to teach over the past 30 years. Their creative minds and compassionate hearts constantly provided me with an authentic love of teaching, a love that never died. For that alone, I am truly grateful.



# Introduction

*A word in earnest is as good as a speech.*

Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*

Surprisingly, the ideas of Noam Chomsky, one of the greatest intellectuals in history, who, according to numerous citation indexes, is in the distinguished company of Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and Charles Darwin, and has single-handedly redefined the scope and parameters of discourse in modern linguistics, cognitive science, psychology, political criticism, media studies, and a vast array of other disciplines, is suspiciously absent from consideration and debate in faculties of education and standard school curriculum. The influence of Chomsky's thought is so profound and far-reaching that it will most likely take centuries before the dust settles and a consensus is reached regarding his overall impact on human thought. Yet, he is not a household name among educators. In fact, Chomsky's ideas are still relatively unknown in the educational community despite the wide appeal and general applicability of his ideas. Teachers tend to cherish old, outdated relics and profess ideas in the classroom that were often discarded by academics decades ago. For instance, as will be noted later, a Skinnerian approach to learning was dismissed by the academic community six decades ago, but radical behaviourism is commonly preached in faculties of education and applied regularly in classroom settings. It is rather difficult to grasp the seriousness of this matter, but it definitely reflects poorly on the teaching profession. For some inexplicable reason, the absence of Chomsky's ideas in educational discourse does not seem to be problematic for either education theorists or classroom teachers.

The primary purpose of this manuscript is to critically examine the relationship between Chomsky's understanding of human nature and education, and explore how it can be used to develop a new approach to teaching and learning. To my knowledge, this is a relatively unexplored area of study. There are only two works that address Chomsky's views on education, but they are edited collections of his essays and speeches which only address education in a general manner. For instance, in *Chomsky on Democracy and Education* (2003), C. P. Otero offers a broad collection of readings on various topics related to education, directly or indirectly, but these readings lack a thorough and systematic presentation of Chomsky's ideas on the teaching and learning process. Likewise, a second work, Donaldo Macedo's *Chomsky on MisEducation* (2000), contains four essays by Chomsky, in addition to a

conversation between Chomsky and Macedo, but, once again, lacks a thorough exploration of Chomsky's understanding of education.

In this manuscript, I approach Chomsky's views on education in a systematic fashion. I claim that his understanding of human nature, with its reliance both on his studies in linguistics and his political discourse, combined with his views on education, can be used as key elements of an effective and highly innovative approach to contemporary schooling. Even though the expression 'human nature' is often misinterpreted, in this manuscript, I understand it to mean a set of traits unique to human beings that clearly define what it means to be human. Later on, I expand on this definition, but for the moment, this should suffice. Similarly, the verb 'to educate' is often misunderstood in educational discourse. Its Latin roots, *educare*, to train or to mould, and *educere*, to lead out, play a key role in Chomsky's understanding of education. Normally, the noun 'education' includes formal educational settings, such as elementary, secondary, and post-secondary institutions, but it can also include adult education centres, community-based literacy programmes, and other non-formal teaching and learning environments. In this manuscript, I focus primarily on the implications of Chomsky's thought for secondary education, but the findings can be easily modified to meet the goals and expectations of other institutions of learning or informal centres of education. The overall thrust of the manuscript is praxis-oriented. It focuses on two key elements found commonly in educational discourse, that is, theory and practice. Chomsky's ideas, especially in linguistics and cognitive science, can often appear to be abstract and highly theoretical. Even so, it is often the case that these ideas can be applied relatively easily in a concrete classroom setting. Therefore, immediately following a consideration of Chomsky's thoughts on human nature and education, I use his ideas to develop a pedagogy that, when put into practice, offers a rather unique and dynamic approach to teaching and learning. Even though the theoretical part of the argument comes primarily from Chomsky; nevertheless, the particularly dynamic and highly efficacious approach to pedagogy that I explore is based on 30 years of teaching experience as a high school educator. My endeavour to use Chomsky's thought as the foundation of a pedagogy is a worthwhile one, because, as will become apparent, Chomsky has a lot to offer educators. My initial intuition is supported by Otero, who states,

Chomsky's theory of knowledge, and above all the epic-making scientific discoveries that underlie it, furnishes a much needed basis for a truly principled conception of democracy and education. In fact, the science of human language that he initiated in the mid-1950s,

which is the first and still the most advanced of the cognitive natural sciences, is at the very core of the study of everything human.<sup>1</sup>

I had the good fortune to meet personally with Chomsky in his office at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and discuss with him many of the ideas that are developed in this manuscript. The entire conversation is included in the final chapter of this work, along with some additional commentary (in square brackets), and acts as a synthesis of some of the ideas on education expressed in the manuscript.

It is important to highlight a fundamental assumption that acts as the basis of the entire structure of the manuscript, an assumption that is commonly shared by Chomsky and other critical educators. It is assumed throughout the work that approaches to teaching and learning are based on a particular understanding of human nature. Educators may regard pedagogy from entirely different socio-political and economic points of view, but their approaches to teaching are grounded upon a specific understanding of what it means to be human. Unfortunately, this understanding may not be well articulated, even though it is the basis of and a motivational factor for the entire educational process. For instance, a pedagogy rooted in Latin American soil, with an emphasis on the emancipatory capacities of individuals and communities, highlights an understanding of human nature that is in complete contrast to a pedagogy which emphasises the social importance of hierarchy and authority. Even so, both forms of pedagogy perpetuate a particular understanding of human nature. Therefore, prior to any valuable discussion about the various facets of teaching and learning, educators need to address the issue of what it means to be human. What is it teachers are trying to do in the classroom? Are they training students to be passive and obedient, or are they encouraging students to think independently? Are teachers moulding students into prefabricated products or encouraging them to explore the world in a creative fashion? Are teachers merely producing workers for the workforce, or are they instilling in students an authentic love of learning? These are important questions for educators to ponder, and their responses will be determined, to a significant degree, by their understanding of human nature.

In Chapter One, I provide a brief biographical sketch of Noam Chomsky. His publication output alone, regardless of the complexity of many of the issues he addresses, is a breathtakingly incomprehensible feat for any human being, to say the least. Thus, it would be far beyond the scope of this manuscript to

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<sup>1</sup> C.P. Otero, *Chomsky on Democracy and Education* (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2003), p.xiv.

highlight each and every key event in Chomsky's life, and discuss in a critical fashion his particular position on a vast array of academic subjects. In this chapter, I consider a few key topics of biographical interest that relate, either directly or indirectly, to Chomsky's understanding of the nature and dynamics of education. In addition, I highlight the way freedom and creativity were promoted in his home environment and also in the Deweyite elementary school he attended as a young child. I contrast this creative approach to learning with a typically rigid and authoritarian approach to pedagogy, as experienced by Chomsky in his high school and early university years and also practised commonly in schools today. I discuss some of Chomsky's achievements as the founder of modern linguistics and also his involvement in American domestic and foreign policy. Then, I reflect on the "tenuous thread" between Chomsky's career as a linguist and his political discourse.

In Chapter Two, I offer for critical consideration the relationship between Chomsky's linguistics and his understanding of human nature. The age-old debate between nature and nurture is revisited, and I argue, especially in light of Chomsky's findings in linguistics and contrary to the assumptions upheld in contemporary education, that the nature side of the debate provides valuable insights into our understanding of human nature, and also into the way we approach classroom teaching and learning. This is followed by a fairly detailed analysis of the relationship between Chomsky's findings in linguistics and human creativity, and compared to an outdated radical behaviourist approach promoted commonly in schools.

In Chapter Three, I consider the views of Chomsky and others on the evolution of language. Then, I discuss what seems to be two problems associated with Chomsky's understanding of human nature, especially in light of his fundamental position in linguistics. The two problems, or what I refer to as bones of contention, are highlighted, and speculative solutions are offered in an attempt to resolve what appears to be a valid challenge from Darwinian thought. This is a particularly important matter because the entire manuscript is based upon Chomsky's understanding of human nature, and if this matter is not addressed adequately, then the edifice of the manuscript can be easily dismantled.

In Chapter Four, I consider Chomsky's political discourse and show how it has something significant to contribute to his understanding of human nature. Various themes are highlighted that are prevalent in Chomsky's works, including his role as a critic of American foreign policy, analysis of the mass media and its role in perpetuating a corporate-defined worldview, the responsibility of intellectuals (especially teachers), and intellectual self-defence, and show how freedom plays a key role in his political analysis.



In Chapter Five, I explore Chomsky's understanding of libertarian education, with an emphasis on the roles played by freedom and creativity in the teaching and learning process. This is compared to ideas promoted by other progressive and libertarian educators. The chapter begins by exploring key figures who have influenced Chomsky's view of education. Then, I focus on liberatory educators who actually founded and operated schools, in order to highlight the practical nature of many of their fundamental ideas, especially those ideas embraced by Chomsky. I consider in detail the alternative schools founded by Henry Thoreau, Leo Tolstoy, Francisco Ferrer, Bertrand Russell, and John Dewey. Also, I offer for consideration a brief comment on the relationship between Chomsky's views on education and critical pedagogy.

In Chapter Six, I present a dynamic and practical pedagogy based on Chomsky's understanding of human nature and education. A few implicit factors associated with a Chomskyan approach to pedagogy are considered, followed by a detailed presentation of the pedagogy's four moments - thematic dialogue, tradition, synthesis, and transformation. It is shown through the use of a detailed case-study, based on personal teaching experiences, how a Chomskyan approach to pedagogy developed earlier can be used in a classroom setting. The pedagogy is applied to a unit in a Grade 12 social science course, and I explore how each moment of the pedagogy unfolds in a dynamic fashion and leads to a highly effective form of transformative action.

In Chapter Seven, I revisit a conversation I had with Chomsky on education. I include some additional commentary to parts of the discussion, and the conversation is used, in a certain fashion, as a synthesis of some of the material considered earlier in the manuscript.

It is worth noting at the outset that the approach taken here to Chomsky's work in linguistics and politics is that of a classroom-based educator. The pedagogy to follow is not the product of research in the dusty halls of academia. Rather, it comes from 30 years of experience as a high school teacher, and also involvement in various non-formal educational settings. I taught in high schools in the Toronto area and also in Mexico. In addition, I participated in non-formal, community-based educational activities in rural Mexico, and in a research centre in the maquiladora region of the U.S.-Mexico border. Also, my non-formal educational activities include grassroots work in a cultural centre in Cuernavaca, Mexico, and participation in an annual international conference of educators from Canada, the U.S., and Mexico. I first heard Chomsky speak while I was a doctoral candidate at the University of Toronto, and that speech was an initial motivating factor behind this manuscript. Throughout my teaching career, I kept Chomsky's ideas nearby and, over the years, developed an approach to teaching rooted in his understanding of the relationship between human nature and education. It is

a practical, hands-on pedagogy that has been implemented, modified, and refined many times in a classroom setting. The pedagogy to follow should not be treated as an end in itself; rather, it should be regarded as a tool for classroom teachers and students in faculties of education to use and modify in their attempts to provide students with a dynamic and highly creative learning environment. As Alfred North Whitehead suggests, “[t]here is no royal road to learning through an airy path of brilliant generalisations.”<sup>2</sup>

The ideas to follow are rooted in various disciplines of study, including linguistics, evolutionary biology, cognitive science, psychology, politics, and educational theory. Inevitably, the overall scope of the manuscript suggests that many of the ideas raised for consideration will be presented in a summary fashion, and this might leave me vulnerable to criticism. Regardless, I will leave the fine details for scholars in each discipline to debate. Derek Bickerton, in his *Language and Species* (1990), expresses similar concerns regarding the overall nature of his work. He states,

The alternative course, pursued here, is by its nature a risky one. It entails crossing disciplinary boundaries and trespassing on fields so various that no single scholar could hope to encompass them all. It is, therefore, inevitable that anyone who attempts such a course may, here and there, quite unintentionally oversimplify or distort the findings of others. The most one can do is to try to keep such errors to a minimum. In any case, the risks seem well worth taking.<sup>3</sup>

But, who is Noam Chomsky? Who is this person who is ranked in the same category as Freud, Marx, and Darwin? In the following chapter, I briefly consider some key events in the life of Chomsky that significantly influenced his views on education.

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<sup>2</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p.6. Originally published in 1929.

<sup>3</sup> Derek Bickerton, *Language and Species* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p.5.

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