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Learning justice in the aristocratic classroom

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Abstract: This essay intends to show why teaching democracy as an aristocrat is an impossibility. It will begin by drawing a comparison between two forms of democracy: the neoliberal, on which traditional, performative education is based, and the participatory, on which justice-driven pedagogy might develop. It will focus particularly on how each understands the individual, knowledge, and freedom, in order to contextualize claims made in the rest of the essay. Drawing on Deweyan instrumentalism, it will then argue that the form and content of learning emerge continuously and are co-determining, in order to claim that teaching via a neoliberal, performative methodology will most often result in the formation of neoliberal, performative habits. Finally, it will offer normative claims regarding how a participatory, justice-focused pedagogy might develop.

Teaching justice in the aristocratic classroom

I begin my course *The Life of the Mind*, an introductory seminar in philosophy of education taught to undergraduates in multiple disciplines, by having students write a reflection responding to the question: "What are the aims of education?" A junior named Evan (pseudonym) began his essay this way: "...when you analyze the opportunity cost of everything we do, it all boils down to time. As the cliché goes, 'Time is money.' It's all about optimizing our time to make the most amount of money possible. As soon as that nest egg is full, we're able to retire and have money left over for pure pleasure. Obviously, to make money, one needs a job. To make the most amount of money possible, one needs the kind of job that a strong education supplies. This leads me [to the conclusion] that the purpose of education is to help provide us with the most fiscally sound job possible." Evan's response is typical of many I receive each year which articulate a deeply rooted neoliberal attitude toward education.

Yet, this essay is not about Evan, but about Evan's instructor: me. As I sat down to grade his reflection and critique its assumptions regarding education and citizenship, I realized that I was in fact

recapitulating the very view which I intended to dissect. While my goal was to help my students conceptualize what it meant to become contributing members of a participatory democracy, I was doing so via a set of pedagogical methods which were both alienating and performative. While I might have been *theoretically correct*, there is no doubt that I was at the very least *pedagogically wrong*: I was teaching democracy as a kind of aristocrat. After all, my critique of Evan was arriving from the high office of the instructor with real consequences not for me, but him.

This essay intends to show why teaching democracy as an aristocrat is an impossibility. It will begin by drawing a comparison between two forms of democracy: the neoliberal, on which traditional, performative education is based, and the participatory, on which justice-driven pedagogy might develop. It will focus particularly on how each understands the individual, knowledge, and freedom, in order to contextualize claims made in the rest of the essay. Drawing on Deweyan instrumentalism, it will then argue that the form and content of learning emerge continuously and are co-determining, in order to claim that teaching via a neoliberal, performative methodology will most often result in the formation of neoliberal, performative habits. Finally, it will offer normative claims regarding how a participatory, justice-focused pedagogy might develop.

Two democracies

The neoliberal view of the individual is grounded in a Cartesian ontology, which conceptualizes persons as essential and static units, existing prior to and distinct from society and social institutions. Through applying the method of philosophical skepticism to his own nature, Descartes (1641/1993) concluded that "...after everything has been most carefully weighed, it must be finally be established that this pronouncement 'I am, I exist' is necessarily true every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind" (p. 17). The mind was, then, *res cogitans* or a "thinking thing" and the essence of the self. This self was understood to be static, unchanging at its core, and essential. In educational terms, this view of the individual results in the core pedagogical unit as being *individual students* who are seen as independent, autonomous learners. They are, further, assumed to begin at the same relative starting point and have relatively the same needs, allowing universities and colleges to pre-structure dimensions

of schooling such as course syllabi, curricula, residence halls, and advising assignments with little to no regard for the unique personhood of students.

This neoliberal system also maintains a commitment to a foundational epistemology, taking the form of a correspondence theory of truth. As Alexandra Shuford (2010) argued, this “is an ontological commitment to the idea that what exists does so *irrespective* of all human perception, interaction, or symbolic rendering” (p. 58). It is the argument that the world exists as a set of bare facts which are independent of our representations of it. Further, “a standard epistemological implication of realism is that *true* beliefs are discernable by how well they *correspond* to the facts of the world. In other words, a theory is true or false, better or worse, by reference to the way the world is” (p. 58). The correspondence theory results in what Garrison (1995) calls the “conduit metaphor” within pedagogy where it is assumed that “psychic entities (e.g., ideas, schemata, and scripts) are conducted from one talking head to another by means of physical symbols and sounds” (p. 727). Here, teachers, students, and administrators begin to view knowledge as a collection of factoids that are dispensed from expert to novice. Further, schooling becomes “a type of input–output system, [which] is reduced to and serves an economic production function” (Olssen, 2005, p. 324). Education, in this instance, is reduced to a commodity.

Lastly, neoliberal freedom, which is better described as “negative freedom,” is conceptualized as the reduction or elimination of societal elements that might act upon individual, autonomous agents. In this view, freedom is life outside the domain of democratic action. Freedom is, then, *freedom from*, or the opposite of *obligation to* the surrounding community. In post-secondary education systems, freedom is freedom to *not think*, or freedom to engage one’s own interests after completing the requirements of imposed coursework.

In contrast, participatory democracy begins with an intersubjective view of the individual, which is a view shared both by Dewey and George Herbert Mead. For both thinkers, the individual does not begin as an essential unit which exists prior to society, but instead the individual emerges as a result of coordinated action in society. For Dewey and Mead, there is no such thing as a *mind* as an essential property of human beings, but to *have a mind* means to be able to take the attitude of another toward a third thing. Dewey (1934/2005) argued that the “mind is primarily a verb. It denotes all

the way in which we deal consciously and expressly with the situations in which we find ourselves. Unfortunately, an influential manner of thinking has changed modes of action into an underlying substance that performs the activities in question. It has treated mind as an independent entity *which* attends, purposes, cares, notices, and remembers” (pp. 274–275). To have a mind means to be able to participate in meaningful social practices by coordinating our behavior with a community, and to have a self means to be able to embody culturally assigned roles and respond to others in their roles (Garrison, 1997, p. 140). If having a *mind* means taking the attitude toward another toward a third thing, then having a *self* is taking the attitude of another toward one’s self. The self is self-reflexive, intersubjective and constructed.

Secondly, in the pragmatic conception, learning, knowing, problem-solving and, in fact, intelligence all take shape within the intersubjective lifeworlds of communities. This is because meaning and knowledge are not detached, analytic objects, but emerge through use in communities of related inquirers. As Charlene Haddock Seigfried (1996) argued, “intelligence is social... because meaning arises from use; to have an idea of a thing means to be able to foresee the probable consequence of its action on us and ours on it” (p. 211). Knowledge, then, is neither detached from social use, nor formed independently, but emerges from problems experienced in the course of communal living. Here, knowledge is a kind of tool or artifact constructed for and emerging out of a particular social use.

Lastly, freedom is not *freedom from* but active, productive participation within communities of inquiry. Maxine Greene (1988) argued that freedom is achieved through continued transactional resistance to social and cultural forces that limit, condition and oppress. In other words, growth is dialectic between learner and lifeworld, which not simply includes, but *requires* accounting for personally limiting forces within the concept of freedom. Justice education in the participatory sense, therefore, *is freedom*, enabling students to emerge as selves within the context of a rich community of inquiry. The implication is that education should not be viewed as a type of preparation for democracy, but should itself be understood as a form of democracy.

Pedagogical holism

I contend, then, that if schooling is viewed as an environment where students emerge as democratic selves, taking participatory action on social, environmental, and economic justice, then educating via a neoliberal, performative infrastructure is an impossibility. This is precisely because learning is more than content-knowledge distributed via the conduit metaphor, but requires developing habits of action through experienced inquiry. Stated another way, students learn as much through the form or methods of education, as they do through its content. Yet, even this claim is only partially correct. In fact, it would be more correct to say that there is *no separation between content and form within inquiry*. In other words, they are co-constituting dimensions of a singular process, so that what a student comes to know, or learns, emerges as a result of the experience they undergo. In the case of Evan, my lesson of justice did not develop as one of participatory emergence, but instead took the form of an aristocratic fiat.

One of the reasons that Dewey always theorized about democracy and education together was that he saw them as manifestations of the same thing, which is an active, productive process of social inquiry for the purposes of growth. Further, both should be approached in a similar way, striving for what we might call *pedagogical holism*, which attempts to describe the synthetic, emergent, communal, and creative unity of the process of inquiry.

The notion of pedagogical holism is particularly important because, unlike the neoliberal view, it rejects the idea that the content of inquiry can be divorced from the emergent form that inquiry takes. Dewey believed that one of the most pervasive mistakes of Western thought was the separation of content and form, or what he called *the philosophical fallacy*, which is separating the product from the process of inquiry. It was within art that he saw a window into its overturning. Dewey (1938/2008) drew on the fine arts in describing the pattern of inquiry, precisely because in all fine arts, the “subject-matters of everyday experience are [quite literally] *transformed* by the development of forms which render certain products of doing and making objects of fine arts” (p. 105). There are three dimensions of the artistic process that are particularly illustrative of an experienced process of inquiry.

The first is that the form and content of a process of inquiry are holistic, unified, and co-determinative of the emergent meaning. Dewey (1934/2005) argued that “this is what it is to have form. It

marks a way of envisaging, of feeling, and of presenting experienced matter so that it most readily and effectively becomes material for the construction of adequate experience.... Hence there can be no distinction drawn, save in reflection, between form and substance... Yet the act itself is exactly *what* it is because of *how* it is done. In the act there is no distinction, but perfect integration of manner and content, form and substance” (p. 114). The pedagogical implication, here, is that different experiences result in different understandings, even of the same concepts. This is because the form of an inquiry is always interdependent with its use. Conversely, the neoliberal view of standardized learning via curriculum, courses, or tests is a kind of fiction that rests on the idea that knowledge (viewed as content) is ontologically distinct from the experience of learning (the form of inquiry).

The second is that the methods by which an inquiry takes shape are themselves an emergent part of the process of inquiry. Here, Dewey (1934/2005) argued that “since the physical material used in production of a work of art is not of itself a medium, no rules can be laid *a priori* down for its proper use. The limits of its esthetic potentialities can be determined only experimentally and by what artists make out of it in practice; another evidence that the *medium* of expression is neither subjective nor objective, but is an experience in which they are integrated into a *new object*” (p. 299). In other words, there is no way to predict precisely what form, method, or approach inquiry should take. Instead, the process must be worked out “on the fly,” and emerge as part of communal engagement with the problem.

The third is that the process of inquiry is transactional, affecting the people carrying out the process as much as that substance which is undergoing change. Stated another way, the emergent process of inquiry depends as much on the inquirer, as it does the problem. The learner and the world are part of the same dyadic cosmos, all of which is reconstructed in the process of inquiry. Dewey (1934/2005) argued that “... every experience is the result of an interaction between a live creature and some aspect of the world in which he lives. A man does something; he lifts, lets us say, a stone. In consequence he undergoes, he suffers, something: the weight, strain, texture of the surface of the thing lifted. The properties thus undergone determine further doing... The process continues *until a mutual adaptation of the self and the object emerges* and that particular experience comes to a close” (p. 45, emphasis added). In other

words, inquiry is not a static person cognitively grasping a static object, but a continual and dyadic process of active reconstruction between organism and environment. Therefore, the process that inquiry takes cannot be laid out prior to presence of a unique inquirer. Further, for learning to take place, both the object and the inquiring subject must be changed.

The implication is that, just as an artist is taught to practice her craft, meaningful pedagogy cannot be accomplished with an abstracted method delivered via aristocratic fiat, but instead operates more like a combination of developed taste, unique preferences and abilities, which transact with a range of social and natural environmental conditions. Therefore, if the goal of schooling is to educate for a participatory type of democratic citizen, it is not enough to simply replace subject matter, but instead the very notion of pedagogy must be reconstructed from its traditional form. Stated another way, a student cannot learn justice by *reading about it*, but only by *entering into a democratic process* otherwise conceptualized as a meaningful

Elements in democratic pedagogy

While outlining *a priori* methods for democratic pedagogy is a contradiction in terms, it is possible to distinguish some dimensions of what must be considered if education for participatory democracy is to occur. Several of these elements are adapted from Helen Longino's (1994) criteria for feminist epistemology, where she attempts to construct a set of values for the project of epistemology which open it up to the critique of alternative philosophical approaches.

Heterogeneity

The first dimension is that pedagogy must strive for heterogeneity. It must include a diversity of voices within the development of the process of inquiry, and recognize multiple experiences with and approaches to problem solving. Stated another way, the pedagogy must be itself be *just*. This concept is rooted in Dewey's creative ontology, which views difference and uniqueness as the primary constituting elements of human experience. To the contrary, traditional, Cartesian ontology, on which the liberal tradition rests, views human beings as static, information processors, and aims for pedagogical homogeneity. Yet, in order to experience

democracy, the inquiry process must bring forward and engage the difference already embedded in the community of inquiry. The notion of heterogeneity also a critique of the neoliberal idea that individual is the correct pedagogical unit, since problems, solutions, and intelligence arise inside diverse communities.

Complexity of experience

A second dimension of democratic pedagogy is that it should strive for complexity within the learning experience, rather than simplicity. In other words, traditional educational methods often strive for efficiency in teaching and learning, which is conceptualized as the most amount of information communicated in the least amount of time, but the converse must actually be assumed if deep learning is to occur.

There are few reasons this is the case. First, because efficiency does not take into account the process of inquiry that the learner must undergo in order to make sense of the problem. It does not include, for example, room for mistakes, failure, serendipity, and new information. Second, it also assumes that bodies of knowledge, which are established solutions to problems as presented in published research and textbooks, represent the correct view of both solving and experiencing the problem-at-hand. Third, it teaches students to assume that the path to the generation of new knowledge is streamlined, when, in fact, this is never the case. To the contrary, the path is difficult, intuitive, and often frustrating, and includes a number of environmental and non-cognitive dimensions. Ultimately, pedagogy aimed at simplicity and efficiency removes learners from the experience of synthetic inquiry and democratic participation.

Process orientation

Third, the concept of pedagogy, itself, must be reconstructed such that both learning and teaching are viewed as continuous with the process of living. The neoliberal approach views pedagogy as an event restricted to the classroom space, which is both distinct and often abstracted from life. To the contrary, in a democratic pedagogy learning is viewed as a continuous process of inquiry, meaning that the classroom must be re-conceptualized as being simply one catalyzing node in a students' connection to wider problems.

A focus on process blurs the boundaries between the roles of students and teachers. It also raises a challenge for faculty, most of

whom who have – quite literally – never interacted with their students outside of the formal classroom space, which is a fundamental starting point for a process-oriented pedagogy. Ultimately, a process orientation yields a schooling environment that is an extension of a student's emerging democratic self.

Applicability to human need

Lastly, a democratic pedagogy demonstrates clear applicability to human need. In other words, there must be a relationship between schooling and the experienced problems of the communities in which students find themselves. Just as Dewey understood knowledge as *emerging from* the lived experiences of human beings in the world, he also believed that whenever any theory was separated from the entrenched realities of lived experience, it fundamentally misunderstood the problem on which it was focused.

For Dewey, knowledge was rooted in the lived experience of human beings transacting in their environment. It was also distributed across multiple ways of understanding and making meaning. This diversity becomes actualized in a democratic system. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1916/2008) wrote:

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer to his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men [sic] from perceiving the full import of their activity. These more numerous and more varied points of contact denote a greater diversity of stimuli to which an individual has to respond; they consequently put a premium on variation in his action... Obviously a society to which stratification into separate classes would be fatal, must see to it that intellectual opportunities are accessible to all on equitable and easy terms. (p. 93)

Knowledge, for Dewey, emerges out of and is fundamentally connected to human need. The goals of knowledge and the goals of justice are, then, one and the same: knowledge and the process of knowing produces freedom, but only when *freedom* is positively understood. Knowledge serves the purpose of justice and justice,

reciprocally, creates better knowledge. Yet, this model only works in a space – including pedagogical space – where power is diffused. Dewey understands society as a democratic one, and the schooling environment to be the unequivocal seat of that democracy.

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