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Original Paper

Paradoxical Education: Learning to Unlearn What We Think We Have Learned

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Abstract

There is no shortage of pedagogical theories from the tradition formal methods of instruction to the free-play methods of unschooling. A sharp shift in education and instruction models took place with the introduction of critical pedagogy. The focus was no longer on the authority of the teacher and the submissive, passive approach taken by the learner, but rather on the engagement between the two. Still, even when critical pedagogy is utilized in a formal model of education something is missing from the system—experiential learning. Although the unschooling method has been criticized it does provide the benefit of experiential learning. This paper explores the nature of education and evaluates models and theories of pedagogy with the conclusion that a paradoxical approach in which there is a merger between the formal guidelines set by traditional educational models and the experiential learning methods of unschooling approach best prepares learners for the world and to be engaged citizens. Although what, precisely, this paradoxical system would entail is not discussed in this paper, it opens the door for further discussion on the topic and for consideration of the theories which have attempted to do exactly this and improve upon them going forward.

Keywords

education, philosophy of education, critical pedagogy, unschooling, educational theory

1. Introduction

For most of us, our education will consist of partly familial lessons—those taught to us by our families as we grow up—which often form the root of our beliefs and values, and our formal education, which largely provides us with the information about the world we require to function as a productive member of society. We call this information, knowledge, which is mostly comprised of facts and data in many formal education models. However, this system is flawed. In most cases, these formal models

emphasize critical thinking and employ the use of that term in their language, yet they leave out of the most crucial modes of critical thought—the ability to unlearn, rethink, and change our perspectives. As Adam Grant (2021) discusses in their new work *Think Again*, the process of rethinking, unlearning, and changing our perspectives is a skill that must be worked on and developed, it is not easy and does not come naturally without constant effort. Instead, by focusing on facts and critical analysis of data or texts, we are taught, for the most part, that there are things which are right and others things which are wrong—actions, ideas, beliefs, and knowledge all have a "right" and a "wrong". Although this makes for easier teaching and lesson planning, the truth is much more complex. Sometimes what we learn is correct under certain circumstances or in certain situations, but wrong (or just simply not practical) in others. This paper will explore the fundamentals of education and aim at introducing a new method of approaching education, in which students are taught not only accurate information, but are taught to rethink their positions and offered contradictory claims and evidence, which I call paradoxical education. It is a pedagogy which eliminates rigidity of curriculum, while nonetheless maintaining practical educational goals.

2. A Lackluster System

Education is debatably the most important of the social services which citizens of a state can be offered. Just as militarization and maintaining a police force with a set of laws and standards, are all aimed at providing for the security of citizens, education itself offers protection, albeit of a different kind. If a military, a police force, and rule of law, protects citizens insofar as they are citizens (i.e, their property, their rights, etc.), education protects citizens insofar as each constitutes a person. Education offers the means through which a person may defend themselves intellectually—it offers intellectual resistance.

Paulo Freire (1970; 1973; 1976), Henry Giroux (1983; 1988), and Joe Kincheloe (2008), among others, recognized this and in hopes of empowering the oppressed, ushered into discussion a new educational framework, critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy aims at bringing forth an individual's ability to enact change and better the world, through the means of a liberated education. It advances an educational theory devoid of the infiltration of propaganda by those who develop curricular structure. Instead, it puts greater emphasis on the students themselves and the way through which they engage with the information being passed on. In this regard, critical pedagogy can be said to be inclusive; however, this may not be the case.

As Susan Gable (2002) has suggested, critical pedagogy may not be as inclusive of all students, and the consciousness which it claims to awaken, may in fact necessarily limit the kinds of students for which it can be considered to be an effective method. She suggests that it is disabled students which can be considered to be marginalized by this form of pedagogy, and perhaps more so than in standard modes of instruction. She notes "Freire never explores how critique and self-transformation play themselves out in the lives of self-identified disabled people, particularly people with significant cognitive disabilities, or in the lives of people with diverse abilities who do not identify as disabled" (Gable,

2002, p. 185).

By raising this concern with what she also claims to be the "the best chance of reaching the goal of a fully inclusive pedagogy that accommodates opportunities to write the self and live in free relation to others", Gable illustrates both the challenging nature of such an inclusive pedagogy as well as the necessity of continuing discussion of more inclusive pedagogy (2002, p. 185). Moving forward, we must be more clear on what purpose education serves. Let us here then first re-evaluate the purpose of education.

3. The Purpose of Education

In critical pedagogy, education aims at providing students with what they require in order to actively engage with their world; education prepares them to take an active role in society and affect change. I want to emphasize here that treating education as more than merely a means of information exchange is both venerable and beneficial. Previous pedagogies which suggested that education was just a way in which one acquires knowledge are clearly misguided; knowledge and the acquisition of it is moot unless one uses it, and hopefully to the good of society.

Nevertheless, treating this as the purpose of education, is cringe-worthy and one must remain cautious that while the knowledge gained through education most certainly ought to be put to use, it need not in itself be useful; that is, the knowledge imparted via education does not need to simply be pragmatic in nature. This, what is ultimately, utilitarian suggestion of the purpose of education loses sight of the "knowledge for its own sake" pedagogical claim that held prominence for many centuries and which still rings true in several ways.

Both of these suggestions have merit and claim reasons education is important and why one ought to pursue education; they articulate a proposed effect of education and knowledge acquisition. Still, education holds a deeper purpose than what either of these proposed. It should come as no surprise as it is neither controversial nor unprecedented, that the purpose of education is, what Aristotle terms eudaimonia, that is, to provide the student with what they require to become the best version of themselves, to reach their potential and flourish as human beings (Aristotle, 1999).

4. Passing the Torch of Information

With the purpose of education to be the provider to students of the possibility of flourishing, the question appears of what is to be considered important knowledge; what skills, information, or talents, are to be taught, acquired, or sharpened, such that students will ultimately be successful and flourish? The ancients placed much emphasis on geometry, medievalists on language and theology, the enlightenment on science. Where do we stand today?

One interesting thing to note here is the quite persistent emphasis on STEM education—it seems this has maintained through the years. Pedagogically, however, focus has changed. Critical thinking has been the major pedagogical push in education in America, though it comes in many forms. McPeck

(1981, p. 4) defines it as "the propensity and skill to engage in an activity with reflective skepticism" whereas Paul claims it is the "disciplined, self-directed thinking which exemplifies the perfection of thinking appropriate to a particular mode or domain of thinking" (1989, p. 214). Stratton suggested that "holistic human activity that involves attitudes and emotions as well as linguistic and logical proficiency" (1996, p. 1). Others, have simply approached critical thinking by way of inclusivity, what it must have. Mulnix, for example, keeping with the insistence on the importance of reason in critical thinking, writes that it "includes a commitment to using reason in the formulation of our beliefs" as well as that it "is an attempt to understand what it is for a belief to be rationally justified" (2010, p. 8).

If indeed critical thinking is that main skill which we must impart to students such that they may flourish, what does it include? Clearly it must have something to do with reason, but it is more than reason simpliciter; it is instead, a way of applying reason. Reason alone, as a faculty, does not account for the whole of critical thinking. We must look beyond reason, but to where?

Jennifer Moon (2012, p. 54) contends that "Critical thinking is more than a set of skills and processes and there are many different skills and actions that may be involved in critical thinking" before beginning a discussion about the necessary role of emotion in critical thinking. Additionally, the environment in which one is educated and develops their ability towards critical thinking plays a major part. She advances this stating that "Critical thinking is "nurtured" in its development. Nurturing might imply that it is best developed in a challenging environment which is relatively free of threat", but later notes that critical thinking might in fact be "just the same as any other thinking, but at an enhanced level of competence" (2012, p. 54).

The kind of threat can range from simply the intimidation of being wrong, to the infestation of propaganda which Critical Pedagogy seeks to fend off. Nevertheless, this concept of education being "free" from threat is crucial to any effective pedagogy. Yet what this adds to critical thinking beyond mere reasoning, is the emotional weight placed on the learning environment. The feelings of the students engaged in learning, are as such just as important in the development of critical thinking as is reason. Critical thinking, a skill of engagement with concepts, ideas, and other pieces of information, is the skill which receives the most attention, and for good reason. However, it is what critical thinking is aimed at which proves to be the problem in education today.

It is well-known that factual education is widespread and the leading focus of education around the world today (Boyle, E., 1971; Williams, J., 2011; Bybee, R. W., 2013; Tytler, R., 2020). Schools and universities teach information, memorization, and knowledge. In part, this is because of the focus on STEM education and the amount of funding which goes for that purpose. It offers students an ability "to become citizens who are better able to make decisions about personal health, energy efficiency, environmental quality, resource use, and national security" by teaching them skills such as "adaptability, complex communication, social skills, nonroutine problem solving, self-management, and systems thinking" (Bybee 2010, p. 996). While there is nothing wrong with this model, in principle, the STEM disciplines all emphasize evidence-based, that is, factual, knowledge. This necessarily means that they

focus on teaching students information, even if the skills they learn may ultimately reject that information.

Bybee writes “the competencies that citizens need to understand and address such issues, from the personal to global perspectives, are as clearly linked to knowledge in the STEM disciplines as they are to economics, politics, and cultural values” (2010, p. 996). No doubt this is correct; such skills are, or should be, linked to all forms of education and knowledge. What is upsetting about this claim is that the latter mentioned fields, those of the humanities and social sciences, are falling short of the skills teaching on which STEM places an emphasis. This is what leads to the low funding provided to humanities, and even the social sciences in comparison, as well as to claims such as Stephen Hawkings’ own that “philosophy is dead.”

The importance of the humanities and social sciences, however, cannot be overstated, as the skill critical thinking, which is all too underdeveloped by the factual knowledge focus of the STEM education, flourishes here, though skills that can be readily applied may be lacking. This is not to say that an expert level knowledge of Homerian epics is useless, though it would likely be hard to find someone who can truly assert its social applicability to the same extent as, for an example, engineering. Both are important in their own way, yet one is clearly more applicable.

This is the same then, as suggesting that both are flawed; neither STEM education nor the typical liberal education of the humanities and social sciences serve as a “complete education” in the traditional sense. The STEM education does not develop critical thinking enough, whereas the humanities and social sciences apply it wrongly. Why is it applied wrongly? Critical thinking, as suggested above, is an engagement with ideas, something prominent in these fields. It does not however teach the reality of the application of these ideas. Consider the following example:

An ethics professor teaching the trolley problem, in which students are presented with a hypothetical situation of determining whether to switch a lever changing the path of a trolly to save three and kill one, or to let it continue on its path towards the three. In getting their students to engage in discussion, critical thinking is occurring and students are learning to think creatively. Students may learn different ways to approach the situation as well as how to formulate their own view. However, put in a situation consisting of an ethical dilemma, even one not so complex like the trolley problem, the students may not follow the view they developed through their own critical thinking during the lesson. Of course, this would not be a problem until we ask the question of why?

5. Alternative Education

Critical thinking is only one of many skills students learn during their education. Though important, the ability to think critically, provides only this ability—it only develops the skill of critical thinking. The hope is that students take this skill and apply it, though this application is difficult as the experience of action is often times completely disconnected from the experience of thinking; things as they occur in thought are usually not the exact same conditions as occur in reality, and additionally, there are extra

situational circumstances that are either not included in thought or are simply unexpected.

Fareed Zakaria notes in his text *In Defense of a Liberal Education*, that one of the greatest aspects of a liberal education is that "it teaches you how to learn" (2015, p. 69). This skill of learning how to learn, not just learning, although nothing new, is gaining popularity as indicated by the increase of homeschooling (Janice & Scott, 2005). Bruce (1980), concluded that "The basic skills of learning how to learn should take their place with the basic skills of reading and arithmetic as the keys to a productive lifetime of personal growth." This seems entirely in place with the development of eudaimonia, which must also occur over one's lifetime. This concept goes back further, but becomes the central pedagogical aspect of the unschooling model.

First proposed by John Holt in 1970, the unschooling model emphasizes what is called "Child-led learning." As Holt himself wrote in his work *How Children Fail*: "Trust Children. Nothing could be more simple, or more difficult. Difficult because to trust children we must first learn to trust ourselves, and most of us were taught as children that we could not be trusted" (1983, pp. xii-xiii). This attitude of letting children lead the way in their own learning process is respectable in many ways. First, it provides the autonomy needed for a child to develop the skills needed to apply critical thinking. Second, it allows children to learn and develop their natural interests. It does these by utilizing "play" or an interaction with the world, which can also be said as experiencing everyday life, as the main method of learning.

Ivan Illich in *Deschooling Society* suggested that "Most learning is not the result of instruction. It is rather the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting. Most people learn best by being "with it," yet school makes them identify their personal, cognitive growth with elaborate planning and manipulation" (1971, p. 44). To that end, unschooling supports child's play as a form of education in a less formalized, but perhaps more meaningful setting. One thing which may be in favor of this "meaningful setting" approach is that it may be the radical change needed for the avoidance of negative socialization that can happen in public schools, as noted by John Taylor Gatto in *Dumbing Us Down* (1991).

These are undoubtedly good things; there are however downsides, one of which is particularly worth noting here. This is the possibility, or rather likelihood, of this method leading toward an auto-didacticism of the individual student. Certainly, self-learning is positive and to be encouraged, is it really enough? I am no mathematician, and have little interest in conducting and producing quantitative research. If left entirely to self-direction, I would never have learned to read, interpret, and create scientific data. Surely not everyone must be a scientist nor is everyone going to conduct studies. At the very least however, I would think most could agree, one can only benefit from knowing how to interpret this kind of data for themselves. In fact, is that not the entire point of the unschooling method? To learn how to learn, that is, how to be able to learn by and for themselves?

Otherwise, one is left with second-hand readings and interpretations of data and how is that any different from one person, a teacher in a classroom, telling another, a student, factual information they

are to make note of? Of course, in order to understand this kind of data requires facilitation. Joel Best, seeking to expand on Huff's almost instant classic *How to Lie With Statistics* (1954), suggested, in regards to statistical data:

Interpreting these numbers, however, requires two distinct sets of statistical skills. The first set concerns matters of calculation—the sort of lessons taught in statistics classes. But in order to assess, to criticize those numbers, we also need to appreciate issues of construction. That is, we need to worry about how statistics were brought into being. Who did the counting? What did they decide to count, and why? How did they go about it? (2005, p. 213)

Both of these require facilitation, training, and instruction, not simply child play. While unschooling methods do not necessarily reject facilitation, both calculation and construction require, at the very least, a semi-formal structure, one not entirely directed by the child or student.

6. Paradoxical Education

The rigid nature of formal or compulsory education models and the radically loose structure of unschooling are seemingly contradictory, and in many ways are. But, like Jill J. Anderson contends in her paper "Bearing Olive Branches: A Case for School-Based and Home Educator Dialogue" (2011), both must work together. As she correctly states at the end, "Public school teachers and home educators share the same basic motive: to provide the best possible education to each and every student in their charge and to help them become lifelong learners and well-rounded adults who are capable of critical thinking" (2011, p. 472).

Joel Best noted the current problem facing the critical thinking era of education, writing that "In the case of critical thinking, no discipline stepped up and took responsibility for teaching critical thinking. Rather, teaching critical thinking was seen as everybody's responsibility" (2005, p. 214). This of course meant that there was no focused or central aspect which took the lead on working towards the development of critical thinking.

Here then I would propose the need for an integrated model, but with a particular focus on the process of unlearning what has been learned. Such a model of education would seek to break down biases and note flaws in judgement, creating a sense of openness to the exploration of new ideas and opinions other than our own. Adam Grant has recently argued in *Think Again* (2021) that there is a general lack of rethinking of our currently held beliefs, and little interest in doing so, at least initially. But as Grant also suggests, it is an important skill and is crucial to both social and personal growth. This seemingly paradoxical education centered on learning to unlearn is necessary to provide opportunities for students of all ages (we should all always be learning) to recognize the merits of opposing views (even if they do not change their mind) as well as build genuine critical thinking skills.

6. Conclusion

Education should not just be about learning information. Instead a proper education, one rooted in critical thinking ought to incorporate the learning of how to unlearn, rethink, and change. Many of the global challenges that we are currently facing and which we can predict that we will be facing in the not-so-distant future will require not only the information and knowledge of the facts and data on the issue, but also the ability to see things from different perspectives and to change our own deeply held beliefs, values, and ideas when necessary. As simple as this might seem, it is a skill that is lacking as it is not one that is taught and emphasized enough in classrooms. Students are often taught facts and to see the world as binary, but complexity reigns supreme and the more we avoid dealing with uncertainty and the process of unlearning, the greater the threat those future challenges will pose.

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