The New Significance of Learning

Imagination's heartwork

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Contents

Introduction

A loss of inspirations

Throughout its history, educational practice has regularly been harnessed to one or other large-scale body of interests. In earlier times, these interests were mainly ecclesiastical, especially in Western societies, although nowadays in the West they tend to be the interests of governments and other corporate bodies. Public arenas are invariably replete with influential groups who have designs of their own on the minds and hearts of the young, and who see public education as a vehicle for legitimately advancing such designs. In such circumstances, the fact that educational practice might have inherent purposes of its own – purposes that are educational *before* they are religious, or political, or anything else – becomes all too frequently obscured. Where this loss of vision of inherent purposes affects multitudes of practitioners themselves – as often happened historically when teachers had to conform to the demands of church or state – the practice atrophies. Atrophy can yield to disfigurement, however, as teachers' commitments to inherently educational purposes are replaced by an enforced acquiescence in government-imposed requirements for measurable performances. The 'effectiveness' sought by the international educational reform of the 1990s, especially in its initial forms, often made such disfigurement the practised norm. It did so by redefining the question of quality in education as one of indexed quantity (of grades, test results, etc.) and by an associated machinery of inspection that effectively sidelined educational purposes themselves.

In the early twenty-first century, effectiveness, as measured by performance indicators, remains a central priority in educational practice. In a post-reform era, things have settled down somewhat. Whole societies have become increasingly at home with such indicators, chiefly as devices that make the conduct of different practices more amenable to prompt public scrutiny. In practices that deal mainly with tangible products (e.g. financial accounting, industrial manufacturing), such devices seem appropriate enough. However, in practices where tangible outcomes bear a complex relationship to the enduring benefits of the practice (e.g. teaching and learning), such devices are deeply problematic if they purport to capture the heart of the matter. In the case of public education, funding is now commonly related to the measured performance of

outcomes, so practitioners' energies become attracted by what is most likely to bring the greatest tangible reward. Where habituation in such exercises becomes a prevalent feature of practitioners' work, major changes occur in workplace cultures. The lore of the practice becomes progressively shorn of its best inspirations, with consequences that are particularly incapacitating for newcomers to the practice. Such workplace cultures have become increasingly common in schools, colleges and other learning environments over the past two decades, just as the more worthy ideals that draw people to teaching as a way of life have become increasingly marginalized.

Against this context of a new colonization of teaching and learning, and the longer context of earlier colonizations, there is a pressing necessity to ask anew about education as a practice: to explore the distinctive benefits for humanity and its prospects that arise from the promotion of learning as an undertaking in its own right. To speak of an undertaking in its own right here is not to suggest that education should enjoy an absolute form of independence. Practices that are supported by the public's monies must be properly answerable to the public for the resources and the public trust placed in them. Crucially however, this means being answerable, not for anything and everything, but for fruits *that are properly those of the practice in question*. Governments are now invariably the agencies through which this trust is mediated to educational practitioners. But governments also frequently mis-recognize the nature of this trust, or can't resist turning it to imperatives of their own and making educational practice more a subordinate than a substantive field of action. Subordinate conceptions of education have become so commonplace that it is difficult for many to understand what a substantive account of educational practice might look like. But such an understanding is just what this book is about, together with an elucidation of the possibilities it recovers for productive action. Let us start, then, with a brief thought experiment.

Suppose one were asked to capture, in a nutshell, a view of educational practice that could command public approval but that wasn't the preserve of one or other interest group. One might venture something like this: Educational practice attempts to uncover the potentials most native to each person, and to nourish these through forms of learning that bring benefits of mind and heart to others as much as to oneself. So far so good perhaps, allowing that one can hardly avoid being a bit general when trying to capture something big in a nutshell. Such attempts to uncover and nourish human potentials might count as initially credible candidates at least, for purposes that are distinctly educational. Each person's range of potentials is, of course, different from that of others. Many individuals are responsive to common influences, but often in different ways and in different degrees. Equally clearly, a topic or field of study that might evoke lasting enthusiasms in one person might find no response in another. Tailoring a curriculum to the best aptitudes and abilities of each is a demanding and discerning undertaking; indeed, a goal that remains desirable, but unachievable in a full sense, for most schools and colleges. Scarcely less demanding is the responsibility to ensure that the cultivation of each person's

strengths contributes to, rather than takes from, the beneficial learning of all. Even where a single individual is concerned, it often occurs that a formal education that succeeds in cultivating some of a person's potentials to high levels of accomplishment leaves other potentials fallow, or undiscovered. High accomplishment itself sometimes becomes turned to avaricious or other dubious purposes. Also, for reasons that are sometimes clear but are often less so, some students remain untouched by or resistant to virtually everything their formal education seeks to offer. The challenges of educational practice are many, and are often intractable.

Reflections like these disclose the deliberate promotion of human learning, through practices described as educational, as a distinct undertaking, or more accurately, a distinct family of undertakings. Commitment to such practices involves a perceptive recognition of the individuality – both promise and limitations – of each human being. It also involves endeavouring to advance the capabilities of each person in shared environments, where efforts at learning become co-operative, venturesome, and mutually respectful. Where educational practice, thus understood and carried out, is largely successful in its formative stages, it contributes to the unforced disclosure of a vibrant sense of personal identity. It develops the capacities and fluencies required to be an open-minded and discerning learner as an adult. It enables an enduring sense of responsibility for one's continuing learning to take root. Consequences like these are possible where the integrity of educational practice – its distinctness and authenticity – is granted sufficient public recognition and support to make such consequences, themselves, realistic goals.

But every practice has a history: of advances, restrictions, flourishings, near-extinctions, and so on. Such histories reveal that prominent social practices – law, medicine, education – can rarely or ever be carried out independently of the dominant powers of particular times and places. To say this is to say that every practice is affected by politics, both internal and external. This distinction is a crucial one. The internal politics are largely concerned with debates among practitioners themselves over how the goals of the practice are best to be defined, organized and pursued. In addition, they frequently involve controversies over who is to be included or excluded from different forms and benefits of the practice. The external politics are normally concerned with the relations between the interests of a particular practice and those of the reigning powers in the society. They focus particularly on how a particular practice might be harnessed or aligned to what the interests of the reigning powers deem desirable, or just, or expedient. Sometimes there might be a substantial measure of agreement between practitioners and the reigning powers. For instance, medical practitioners might be in substantial agreement with a government Ministry of Health on a range of priorities for the promotion of public health. But there could be deep divisions between both parties on issues such as the ranking or the resourcing of such priorities. Where education is concerned, the long history of the practice in Western civilizations shows that such harnessing has been an ever-recurring, or even an ever-present, feature.

A landmark example from recent times lies in the indignation, then dismay, of teachers in many Western countries at government reforms of the 1990s that removed central discretionary powers from teachers' hands to those of newly powerful government agencies.

But interventions of this kind were so common in educational practice in previous centuries that they hardly counted as landmarks. Of course, in those earlier times, the reigning powers were more usually ecclesiastical than political. But the nature and reach of the interventions were such that whatever integrity the practice might seek to uphold was more often honoured in the breach than in the observance. An appreciation of this point is important to understand the context for the enquiry this book hopes to undertake. A few key historical observations will help to establish that context and also to identify some important themes for exploration in the chapters that follow.

Historical insights

Learning received a particular flavour and significance in Western civilization for more than 1,000 years, roughly from the year AD 800 (the coronation of Charlemagne) to the end of the eighteenth century (the aftermath of the American and French Revolutions). This was so mainly because of the association of learning itself with the patronage of the Christian church, and in later centuries the Christian churches. Monastery and cathedral schools grew up in many European locations during the early Middle Ages and these led, from the eleventh century onwards, to the rise of universities as places of advanced learning. From foundations such as Bologna (1088), Paris (c.1150), Oxford (c.1167) and Salamanca (1218), Christian universities became major centres of study throughout Europe in the following centuries. These historical developments helped to institutionalize the link between the interests of religion and those of education. This marked a widespread consecration of learning, which became a defining feature of European culture – to such an extent that it was difficult to conceive of education on any large scale outside of a religious context. However, this consecration of learning, as Chapter 1 will illustrate, was also a custodianship of learning. Custodianship here means a schooling of mind and heart that was often as restrictive as it was enabling, and that frequently associated virtue with vehemence in belief and action – even with violence towards contrasting outlooks. The notion of 'Christendom', which nowadays has a quaint ring to it, captures something of this fusion of religion with the conduct of learning. It also captures a certain deference towards religious authority on the part of monarchs and other political leaders. As a religious-cultural ethos, 'Christendom' was both a geographical and a historical reality. The word refers not only to the geographical regions where public life was pervaded by ecclesiastical influence,[1] but also to a long historical era. This stretched from the Middle Ages, through the denominational aftermath of the Reformation, up to the effective separation of church and state in many Western countries after the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

Curiously, the dismantling of the link between religion and public life in one country after another rarely meant a new freedom for the conduct of learning in schools and colleges. Despite inspirations supplied by Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Froebel from the late eighteenth century onwards, custodial conceptions of educational practice invariably survived even the more radical forms of revolution. Where ecclesiastical authorities lost control of schooling, that control passed not to schools themselves, but to newly powerful secular interests, often of a utilitarian, or nationalist, or commercial tenor. To ask why the powers that were formerly in religious hands didn't now pass to the hands of educational practitioners, or to their representative leaders, is to ask what might seem an obvious question. Yet it is a question that has rarely been raised as an explicit theme by scholarly research in the field of education. It would seem that most scholars, and people more widely, accept as 'natural' the outlook that education is essentially a subordinate undertaking; that it must receive its primary cast and character from a class of superiors – political, religious, or otherwise.

The 'naturalness' of this view could have arisen, however, only by the displacement, over many centuries, of a more independent view of the purposes of human learning. Such an independent view, as exemplified (for instance) in the everyday actions of Socrates in ancient Athens, is home to many incisive insights that still remain under-explored. That is to say, Socrates' life and work identifies a particularly promising contribution to Western educational practice, not merely to Western philosophy. This *educational* legacy might subsequently have become a cherished tradition in teaching and learning in Europe and farther afield. That it didn't do so says much for the political power and influence of what displaced it. More subtly, however, it also beckons attention towards the potential of what became eclipsed.

Let us turn now to what can be gleaned from these brief historical observations. To begin with, they show that a fuller and more critical understanding is called for of the 'natural' view and of its enduring force. The same goes for the eclipsed potential of the more independent view. This fuller understanding will enable a searching appraisal of the appropriateness of interventions-from-above in educational practice, including both historical interventions and the major educational reforms of recent decades. It will help to illuminate both the underlying assumptions of reform orthodoxy and the possibilities that a less encumbered kind of educational thinking might reveal. Such a fuller understanding can be advanced, first, by critically investigating the 'natural' view, including its more contemporary secular forms. The fruits of this investigation should, in turn, cast in sharper relief the chief features of an independent view. They might thus disclose its more distinctive insights and illustrate its aptness to societies where learning is to be taken seriously as a life-enhancing, as well as a life-long, endeavour.

The case to be made

Uncovering such an original understanding and highlighting its more salient consequences for educational practice are the chief aims of this book. But to make a convincing case, it will be necessary to establish at an early stage at least the three following points: first, to show what is distinctive about educational purposes (i.e. taken in their own right) and what is lost by an abiding failure to appreciate their integrity; second, to show that such loss remains a decisive feature of today's changing landscapes of learning, not least in the international rise of a new set of goals for educational practice in recent decades; and third, to illustrate that in the democracies of the West, the newly ascendant goals of educational reform compound the loss in question, chiefly by promoting a coercive uniformity that goes largely unremarked behind the everyday faces of a wider pluralism.

I am aware that these three aims look like an overture to a large-scale critique. So it's important to say a few words here about how the enquiry might proceed, and about my own standpoint as author. To begin with, I should stress that, where social practices are concerned, I am unhappy with any investigation that undertakes a critique and then regards its work done. A critique of anything called a practice is less than fully intelligible unless one asks the question: critique in the name of what?, or more precisely, critique for the sake of what? Making such questions explicit puts the spotlight on the necessity for an enquiry into any practice to move beyond critique. This is a necessity not so much to provide a blueprint or grand design for action, but to use the fruits of the critique to identify some important inspirations and insights for advancing the practice concerned. More particularly, these would be inspirations that might be promising and defensible candidates for the commitments of those engaged in the practice. In other words, they would seek to be worthy of acceptance among practitioners as such (i.e. universally), albeit with a circumspect eye to cultural and social factors. The Hippocratic Oath for medical practitioners, including successive variants of it in the history of medicine as a practice, provides a rough example of what is involved here.[2] Such oaths are largely strangers, or are at best implicit, where education is concerned. Even where practitioners hold to something like them, they remain unvoiced. Had education gained something of the degree of independence achieved by medicine, its historical story would be interestingly different. So also would its present concerns and future expectations. These are issues that we will explore in some detail in later pages.

To venture beyond critique in the case of a practice such as teaching and learning, which is essentially a social one (as distinct from practices like medicine with a stronger basis in the natural sciences), is of course a fallible undertaking. It may also be a hazardous one, especially where some prominent currents in today's intellectual life insist on an insurmountable 'incommensurability' of human interests. An incommensurability stance gives priority to the identification and affirmation of differences, and is especially wary

of 'consensualism' – namely, of socially engineered forms of consensus that marginalize or oppress those voices that prove intractable to such engineering. Watchful of the claims of any privileged 'we' in the conduct of public debates, upholders of the incommensurability stance would tend to view with deep scepticism any arguments that seek universal acceptance, whether those arguments are addressed to the practitioners of a particular practice or to the wider diversity of humanity. This scepticism, a capacity for which is essential for a proper working of democracy, has been a notable feature of recent writings in a post-modern vein – for example, those of influential authors such as Jean François Lyotard and Michel Foucault. Its insights have to be taken seriously, but its debilitating effects have to be reviewed with no less seriousness, particularly its effects on the kind of venturing needed to advance both the understanding and the conduct of important social practices.

To insist on the primacy of incommensurability is, in effect, to make a virtue of adversarial action. It is to view such action more as an end than as a sometimes necessary means. Such insistence can be described as a strong version of the incommensurability stance. But there is something odd about the logic of such a stance. For instance, if I am an upholder of a strong version of incommensurability, and I write a book advocating this stance, to whom is the book addressed? Just to those who might already be likely to agree with me? Or to that more diverse potential readership whom I would hope to influence, or persuade to my stance? If the latter, I have already abandoned a strong version of the incommensurability stance. In fact, it is difficult to see how any author who addresses a body of arguments to the public can hold a strong version of the incommensurability stance. To write a book or an article is to ask for a hearing. It is to hope to influence, in some degree, readers' thoughts and to prompt them to new pathways – even to encourage a change of outlook among some readers who might previously have thought and believed quite differently. In short, while it isn't possible to dissolve or overcome all human differences, incommensurability is not such a stumbling block to human thought and action as to preclude renewed efforts to learn from the perspectives of others.

As regards the style of the enquiry, I hope to make this conversational – not so much a dialogue as an invitation to readers to an investigation that is in some real measure a joint one. For the author, this involves cultivating a keen alertness to possible points of disagreement that readers might raise. Such an approach means that there will be frequent use of the first person, both singular and plural. Using 'we' can, of course, be seductive. Even employing as much critical vigilance as possible, it is still difficult to avoid using a privileged 'we' that hides its own exclusive character. For instance, what remains unspoken in 'we' is often something like: 'we educated Westerners', 'we defenders of high standards', 'we refined intellectuals', or other such self-designation. In keeping with the conversational approach just mentioned, it is important to ensure as far as possible that the use of 'we' remains alert to such self-regarding traps. In my own use of it, I hope to make it refer simply to the reader and myself; or more widely, my readers, *whoever they happen to be*, and myself. This use of

'we' acknowledges from the start that readers are differently predisposed; the more widely so, the larger the readership happens to be. But it also presupposes that whoever picks up a book with a readiness to read it is, in some degree, prepared to lend an ear, critical or sympathetic as the case may be, to what the author seeks to say.

Mapping the enquiry

The remainder of the Introduction will now identify in outline the structure of the book and the concerns of each chapter. Part I, 'The Identity of Education as a Practice', contains six chapters and seeks to reclaim the all-but-obscured idea that education is a practice with an integrity of its own. Chapter 1 investigates how it became natural in Western civilizations to view education less as an independent practice concerned with inherent purposes of learning, and more as a subordinate undertaking controlled by the powers-that-be in a particular society. Command of education by an external body would have been quite contrary to customary practice in ancient Athens, for instance.[3] The historical explorations in the opening chapter show how the growth of such control involved an effective conquest of practice, mainly by institutionalized religion in pre-modern times, but by a more worldly body of beliefs in an increasingly globalized age. Highlighting the point that historical influences remain active in every practice, efforts are made in the later part of the chapter to capture something definitive of education as a practice with an integrity of its own.

The second chapter reviews a widespread hesitancy among today's philosophers and other intellectuals to put visionary ideals for humanity's betterment, including its educational betterment, into the public arena. This hesitancy allows influence and initiative to become more concentrated in other hands – usually bureaucratic hands. There is no shortage, for instance, of schemes for a betterment understood in more technical terms: as effectiveness measured by performance indicators. The hesitancy among intellectuals is identified as a notable consequence of the dominance of post-modern currents of thinking in recent decades. Incisive critique has been conspicuously to the fore in such currents of thinking. But this critique's preoccupation with destabilizing newly emergent powers-on-the-rise before they get too dominant has made its own best efforts reluctant to venture further than critique itself. Meanwhile, a new and forceful uniformity in the domains of economy and working life pragmatically eschews the culture wars of post-modernism and continues to establish its dominion internationally. The later parts of the chapter argue that, where education is concerned, it is particularly necessary to press beyond critique and to elucidate the distinctiveness of the practice itself. This necessity springs first from imperatives that are inherently educational. But it also springs from a recognition that educational practice has shown itself to be particularly vulnerable to the reforming zeal of champions of the new uniformity.

The integrity of education as a practice is explored in some detail in

Chapter 3. The argument here highlights the point that historical influences are active in every practice, whether these influences are religious, political, cultural or otherwise. However, where such influences come to dominate the practice – as can happen in practices such as medicine and law, as well as in education – the inherent purposes of the practice become sidelined, or realigned to extrinsic goals or interests. Bearing such tendencies in mind, efforts are made to capture something definitive of education as a practice in its own right. Central features of the educational work of Socrates are examined, focusing on a range of striking pedagogical insights that underlie these features. But these imaginative Socratic insights never attained the status of a robust tradition in the world of learning. They were eclipsed as a particular form of Christianity – heavily Platonist in its theology and its educational stance – became institutionalized as the religion of the Roman Empire, and later of Western civilization. Few things were more unwelcome to empire or church than the Greek (but un-Platonist) idea of education as practice undertaken by practitioners with a strong sense of occupational identity who enjoyed a large measure of autonomy in their local settings.

Chapter 4 begins with a critical review of Alasdair MacIntyre's bold claim that teaching is not a practice, but a set of skills; that teaching is 'never more than a means'. After illustrating that a distinction between means and ends doesn't hold up in teaching, attention in this chapter focuses on a close consideration of the kinds of relationships that constitute teaching and learning. Four kinds of 'relationships of learning' are explored in turn: the teacher's relationship to students; to the subject or material being taught; to colleagues, parents and others; and finally the teacher's relationship to him/herself, within which the nature and significance of the other three relationships are decided. These relationships are each considered as active interplays, as is their mingling with each other. They invariably involve a wooing – fruitful, frustrated or other. In this wooing, there is, on the one hand, the voice of a subject that seeks to speak through the teacher's enactments. On the other, there are sensibilities (including abilities) of a diversity of learners. To show what this means in practice, and to highlight that teaching inescapably goes beyond skill and involves the teacher's self-understanding, the chapter concludes with a practical example of such wooing and its inherent benefits. This is presented as a fictional, although realistic, first-person account.

Chapter 5 examines the neglected importance of the teacher's imaginative capabilities, especially in his or her relationship with the subject or theme being studied. This begins with a review of George Steiner's exalted conception of pedagogical imagination in his *Lessons of the Masters*. I argue here that, although teaching remains in Steiner's debt for his many striking insights, his understanding of the central educational relationship as that between masters and disciples is too one-sided. It obscures much of what it had begun to open up. To explore this obscured landscape further, the chapter seeks to illuminate a conception of pedagogic imagination that is no less incisive, but notably less aristocratic, than Steiner's. This exploration discloses teaching as the