

Pragmatism and Pedagogy

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Gregory Heath

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There is currently dramatic change in curriculum and pedagogical practice at all levels of education. This is reflected in the widespread adoption of the *Reggio Emilia* methodology in early childhood education to capability driven curriculum in universities such as RMIT. There is a need for the voice of the philosophy of education to be heard and indeed nurtured, but it has been relatively muted in education debates, especially beyond the academy, in recent years.

The question arose at the INPE conference in Oslo about the impact of philosophy of education. Terry McLaughlin, Chair of the Steering committee, voiced the view that despite dramatic changes in education and its prominence in the political agendas of most countries, with the possible exception of Australia, but not New Zealand, philosophy of education was having little impact when it should be at the forefront. This proposition was greeted with general acceptance. I must concur with the view, but with some serious reservations. This situation, I think, can be contrasted with the situation not so long ago, in the 1970's and 80's when curriculum, policy, pedagogy were all driven by strong philosophical activity. We are all familiar with the names and the theories of those times. Indeed there was a cross over between the debates of philosophy of education and "mainstream" philosophy. The reservations to which I refer really relate to shift in the locus of educational practice. There has been significant re-conceptualisation of workplace education, philosophy in the school curriculum and in the ideas of life-wide and lifelong learning. Some of these notions drive, for instance, the Australian Council of Deans of Education Charter with its statement of a "new basics" for inclusive citizenship.

However this being said many important areas of education practice are currently largely "philosophy free" zones. In this category I would include schooling policy, higher education policy and teacher education.

The current state of affairs is not a reflection on the quality and relevance of recent philosophy in education. Much of it by philosophers such as Rizvi, Michael Peters, Usher and Hager to name a few familiar to us has not only been of the first rank but also been of the greatest importance to the development of workplace learning, cultural diversity and other aspects of educational practice. It is rather a matter of “traction” and the influence of ideas over policy and practice. Here the philosophy of education has been at the mercy of forces well outside the immediate orbit of the academy.

A period of education driven by strongly instrumental motivations has obscured the philosophical and theoretical concerns with education. This period can be dated from about the early 1980’s and is still running strongly, although the signs of resistance are starting to gather vigour. This will change and probably sooner rather later, but the nature of the change is hard to anticipate. Recent publications such as those by Beckett and Hager and Christopher Winch are an indication of the change. I will return to this theme later.

The position of philosophy of education can be seen in contrast to the success of philosophy in some other areas; most notably in bioethics, feminist philosophy, environmental philosophy and other areas of applied philosophy. The success in these areas (and not in others) is in itself curious and rightly the subject of analysis and reflection. Here it could be said that policy makers and professional practitioners have had to turn to philosophy for direction, and in certain cases legitimation, for guidance and authorisation. This has generally not been the case in education where policy makers and practitioners have more frequently sought the guidance and legitimation of the market for educational initiatives. In the tertiary sector this has become almost unquestionable, an orthodox hegemony, but it is also dominant in the other sectors as well. Simon Marginson and Mark Considine have eloquently put this state of affairs on the record. The bad news is that Simon Marginson believes it will get worse before it gets better.

A further factor in the distancing of educational practice from philosophical consideration is the retreat of the state from engagement with education. The retreat of the state is

indeed a condition for dominance of the market in educational policy. However this retreat is very selective, it is a retreat from funding for and governance of education but this is not matched by a corresponding retreat from control of what can be called the agenda or purposes of education. To this extent the privatisation agenda, which can be seen to have some advantages, is not an agenda that empowers the learners of other stakeholders to govern the education process. National governments increasingly use audit mechanisms, including compulsory testing league tables, as means of control. Usually this amounts to a partially successful form of coercive control. There is always resistance but it is usually successful enough as steering mechanism to keep the implementation of the policy agenda on track.

So we are faced with a paradoxical position where the governments of nation states disengage with education, but at the same time seek to exercise control over education. A little deconstruction and reflection might help to resolve this apparent paradox.

The simplest answer is that governments these days, with the possible exception of North Korea and a few others are not entirely sovereign in their own lands. They are driven by the forces of globalisation and, in Australia's case, by the American global hegemony. Thus when governments shape education policy they are about creating the sorts of people who have the sorts of knowledge, understanding and values that will serve the demands of the global market. In the meantime they are required for purposes of internal legitimacy to be seen to meet the needs of their immediate constituencies. Therefore the regulation of standards and the mandating of outcomes through audit becomes the legitimating mechanism.

Thus it is no surprise that mantra of work ready graduates possessing the attributes or capabilities demanded by global corporations becomes the principal educational goal. Capability can be seen as the ability to understand and effectively act in a field of practice and in civic life. The focus is on linking knowledge, action and learning. The curriculum emphasis is on integrated or holistic approaches in which capable performance is the outcome. A capability can be seen as the integration of knowledge, skills, ethics and

judgement in a given context for action (Stephenson, 1998, cited in Doncaster and Lester, 2002)..

At RMIT, we seek to enable our graduates to ‘reflect upon their actions as engaged citizens in the context of local diversity and multiculturalism, increasing globalisation, and the university’s commitment to awareness of global sustainability and indigenous issues’ (RMIT, 2002: 80). “At the broadest level such graduates will have the capability to:

- Participate actively in their professional and social communities of practice utilising a knowledge capability that enables them to deal effectively with each new situation in their professional and social lives
- Reflect upon their actions employing theoretical frameworks and models of practice necessary for fully engaged citizenship
- Make context sensitive judgements that enable them to continuously develop and transform their practice and themselves.
- The need for a capability driven curriculum is predicated on three principal arguments. The first derives from the longstanding view that one part of the role of a university is to provide citizens who can operate as agents of social good in the community.
- The second recognises that disciplinary expertise is only one from a much larger set of capabilities that determines whether an individual will operate successfully when entering a profession. This is a view that has been argued consistently by employers from a diverse range of professional domains.
- The third recognises that current and future university graduates will live and practice in a world that is significantly different from the current one and will therefore need to learn in ways that equip them to make sense of this rapidly changing world whose future shape is largely unknown.”

This discussion of capabilities pays little regard to many of the more noble aims of education and tend to bypass the aims of personal enrichment with its implied sub categories of intellectual and moral depth and spiritual capacity. The notion of the

outcomes of education is firmly market driven by the specification of employer demands. There is an interesting importation of the notion of capability here from the work of Amartya Sen, started as far back as 1983 when he introduced the notion capabilities into the debate about poverty and economic rights. The question he posed was not what people have a right to, in the abstract so to speak, but what interests are they actually capable of commanding. This notion of capability and interest is one that can profitably be introduced into the current debate on the purposes of education and contrasted with instrumentalist views.

In many ways these tensions in debates about the aims of education have always been there. It is the tension between the position characterised by Plato of preparing the dutiful servants of the Polis and that of Kant of generating an enlightened and ennobled human spirit or of the cultivation of the “divine element of Aristotle. But of course each generation must renew the dialectic in its own context and ours is a unique context with elements that are either qualitatively or quantitatively different any previous epoch. These go by the shorthand titles of “globalisation” “postmodernism”, “diversity” and “sustainability”. We know what each of these is about and know that they must be unpacked at length.

So what can be done to increase the impact of philosophy of education on the broader education community. I will argue that we can use a new approach based on philosophical pragmatism to steer a course between the dogmatism of the enlightenment rationalism and post-modern relativism.

The situating of the dialectic in the present context is problematic. As Usher and Edwards point out, education as we understand it is the “dutiful child of the enlightenment”. The aims of education are still seen as a linear empowerment through rational mastery. Zygmunt Bauman in *Intimations of Postmodernity* refers to Spinoza’s dictum “if I know the truth and you are ignorant, to make you change your thoughts and ways is my moral duty; refraining from doing so would be cruel and selfish”¹ This view that there is a necessity to educate is clearly, as Usher and Edwards state a prototypical statement of the

project of modernity. It clearly embodies the modern view of education that it is the role of education to enlighten with a single reason and single orientation to the good. And again as Usher and Edwards state it is here that the traditional philosophy of education has been based as an analytical and critical extrapolation of enlightenment rationality. With this model in mind it is difficult to situate the plurality of discourses that postmodernity interposes on us. I would note here that a constructive way forward is the strategic postmodernism proposed by Beckett and Hager. They provide an excellent discussions of the development of Lemert's notion of "strategic postmodernism" in the context of situated practice, the role of judgement in workplace learning and the relationship between language and experience. However there has been a mismatch between philosophical developments associated with post-modernism and the directions of education; with education largely trailing the philosophical thought.

I think it is a fair observation to say that in the contested terrain of educational thought there have been significant theorists who have taken up and indeed instigated the critical challenge to the practice of education. Yet the controllers of the education process have been either slow to respond at best, or have displayed outright hostility at worst. Here of course education is seen not just as a means of personal fulfilment and enrichment but as a means for shaping future society so that current narrow interests and values can be projected forward into the future for the purposes of rationalisation of the future and also even for future generations. Aristotle was right on this account that the purpose of politics and the purpose of education coincide so that the purpose of education should be to create the best men (sic) to create the best state. Of course this depends on one's conception of the best state. However this is a very well traversed slippery slope from which I will now hastily retreat.

What I will now refocus on is of "globalisation" "postmodernism", "diversity" and "sustainability" and propose a way forward. These are the themes which characterise the world which education as a practice and philosophy of education needs to now address.

The dilemma as I see it is how can we continue the discourses of the past, so rich in their embrace of ennoblement of the human species as good, just, spiritual and wise; yet at the same time take account of the radically transformed contexts of the policy and practice of education. Postmodernism won't achieve it, not at least in its own terms. It is here that it becomes necessary to turn, or turn again to philosophical pragmatism.

Clearly Dewey's influential ideas in education, and much beyond, were strongly influenced by his position as a later member of the school of American Pragmatism. It is also salutary to remind ourselves that Habermas derived the theory of communicative action from pragmatism; in this case from Pierce via the interpretation of Karl-Otto Apel. It is even the case that as notable a philosopher as Hilary Putnam is prepared to attribute a strong pragmatic theme to Wittgenstein centring on the notions of the language game and form of life as consensus in practice. Perhaps it is necessary to point out that the origins of pragmatism lie with Charles Sanders Pierce who tried to preserve the Kantian insights by addressing a new conception of the "things in themselves". For instance.

The opinion, which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth and the object represented in this opinion is the real.²

Whilst debate continues as to the extent to which Peirce was a realist or idealist, the feature that interests us here is that he had committed himself to intersubjective criteria for truth.³ The view that what had been regarded as absolute in one form or another as corresponding to some ultimate reality was in fact based on a process of agreement. The agreement which he attempted to articulate was not a simple relativist consensus but a logical process based on agreement about the conditions for judgement about the validity of a proposition. The criteria he was seeking to achieve were neither subjective nor absolute but dependant on the agreement about the grounds for judgement by well-informed and well-intentioned practitioners. This, I claim, could be the basis for a renewed claim for the centrality of the practice of education.

Let me enter into a short discursive process to substantiate the claim and the follow through some of the ramifications.

I would now claim that the origins of pragmatism can legitimately be traced back to Kant. The notion of grounds for agreement in judgement can be seen as developing throughout the major critical works and especially of course in the *Critique of Judgement*. There is a long tale to be told here, which must wait for later telling but for our interests in informing the directions for the philosophy of education it is the late essays that lay the ground for the development of pragmatism. In the essay *What is Enlightenment* Kant puts an interesting view, perhaps somewhat enlightened for his time. He disagrees with other enlightenment thinkers such as Locke or Voltaire (but interestingly not Hume) in that he did not see the acquisition of knowledge as a good in itself. He did not hold the view that knowledge of itself would push back the bounds of superstition or lead to technological mastery. No, as Humphrey says he "...saw knowledge as more a means than an end",⁴ He also had somewhat similar views about reason which wanted to liberate from both the dogmatism of religion and the dictates of natural science. He did not see reason as simply dictated by the laws of nature. Kant in this essay says something quite revolutionary for the time that "reason has insight into that which it produces after a plan of its own, and ...it must not allow itself to be kept, as it were in nature's leadstrings..."⁵ These two factors knowledge as leading to an end, usually a moral end and reason leading to autonomy are what make use enlightened, self ruling and free beings.

It is in this sense that Kant sees humans as free and rational. But here also, I contend, are the seeds of the pragmatism to be developed in another continent about a century later. It is of course no accident that philosophical pragmatism developed in America. It was of course a very pragmatic and fluid society at the time looking to establish its "new world" credentials. But it is also interesting that the founder of pragmatism Charles Sanders Pierce looked back to Kant who was an archetypal "old world" figure for his inspiration to found a semiotic "Copernican revolution".

The point I wish to make by this is that there is an alternative version of enlightenment to that of Spinoza or Locke, or indeed Rousseau, a version in which knowledge and reason are conceived as supporting freedom and autonomy. A view of enlightenment which can accommodate plurality without incurring the implications of relativism associated with various versions of postmodernism, such as that proposed by Lyotard. And, of course, one that avoids the rigid rationalisation of functionalist logic at the heart of the modernist project.

My claim here is that the traditional purposes of education to ennoble the human spirit and dignify social existence can remain and indeed be strengthened in the current context marked by "globalisation" "postmodernism", "diversity" and "sustainability".

Dewey was without doubt highly prescient in his theoretical treatment of education and society. This prescience was in the linking of knowledge to experience and education to communication and the ground of democracy as freedom in practice. He says of knowledge "Knowledge is not just something of which we are now conscious of, but consists of the dispositions we consciously use in understanding what happens now"⁶ It is also, he continues "the act of perceiving the connection between ourselves and the world in which we live". The pragmatist insight is clear here and points to a new educational practice. But communication, particularly those truth constitutive links, are the other side of the equation. Here Dewey has to say,

Such social divisions as interfere with free and full intercourse react to make the intelligence and knowing of members of the separated classes one-sided.

Here is a position on the process of dialogue clearly articulated in a way that pre-empted the un-coerced "ideal speech situation" of Habermas a generation later. He also attacks traditional philosophical systems as cutting off change and presenting barriers to intercourse, which prevent experience being enriched by "others who are differently situated".

He advocates in a democracy “education [as] the connection of the acquisition of knowledge in the schools with activities, or occupations carried on in the medium of associated life.”⁷

Apart from the genius of Dewey here I want to illustrate how pragmatism can transcend the impasse between traditional modernist theories of education and postmodern views of education. Here is a platform that can accommodate difference and plurality yet provide a communicative framework for effective dialogue and judgement.

What does this mean for education in the context marked by “globalisation”, “postmodernism”, “diversity” and “sustainability”?

First, that education can be diverse in its aims and approaches whilst maintaining at a general level the common goals of personal and social enrichment. This could be illustrated by competing paradigms of explanation or different approaches to knowledge formation.

Secondly, that education can be both local and global. Here there can be different levels of consensus formation so that the grounds for agreement at a global level can vary from grounds for agreement at a local level. In effect the global community of communication and the local community of communication will differ. One can be a member of both communities yet accept that the consensus formations of each may differ.

Thirdly, that there can be a plurality of learning without privileging one form of learning over another. Thus we learn from experience in one situated practice but from theory in another discourse but of course learning is most effective when one form intersects or reflects another. This can include a diversity of discourses not bound by disciplines groups, yet discourse that have a situating framework.

Fourthly, Dewey’s link between, communication, education and democracy provides a basis for a critical and reflective approach to the process of learning. This harks back to

Kant with freedom and autonomy of judgement at the core of knowledge. Here the learner and learning is empowered. The knowledge gained and its means of acquisition is determined by the legitimate interests of the situated individual and not by the market or exogenous interests.

It is, I claim, by following a pragmatic path to new pedagogies that philosophers of education can reconnect with the debates and policy steering mechanisms in educational policy and practice from which they have become largely estranged.

¹ Quoted in Usher, R and Edwards. R (1994) *Postmodernism and Education* Routledge London p. 125

² Ibid.

³ The debate about realism versus idealism has been far reaching in Peirce scholarship and centres around the degree to which Peirce can be read as a naturalist or positivist or as a Kantian idealist. This issue is discussed, for instance, by Christopher Hookway and Carl Hausman in various writings.

⁴ Kant Immanuel, (1983) Humphrey, T Ed *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, Hackett, Indianapolis p. 3.

⁵ Ibid.,

⁶ Dewey, J (1944), *Democracy and Education*, Free Press, New York p.344.

⁷ Ibid., p.345