

Having the Courage to Measure up for Education

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Abstract

In this “age of measurement” it is increasingly difficult for educators to educate (Biesta, 2010). The pressures to conform to the demands of bureaucratic authorities generally trump over educators and their aims and desires to educate. While external authorities may contribute to frustrating the potential of education, according to Dewey (1988a, p. 133) there might be another contributing factor. He suggests that our own aims and desires to educate may not have deep enough roots. He suggests that educators ought to have “cultivated” and “significant conscious desires” and even a disposition to be “courageous” (1988a, p. 134; 1988b, p. 38) in order to attain the independence to ensure that our practices in education are indeed educational. Dewey (1934) called such a disposition a “religious attitude” because it engages with the ultimate concerns that people can aspire towards. In this paper I shall argue that this religious attitude of Dewey’s which can enable our roots to deepen, does not pertain just to our aims of education as an intellectual phenomenon, but one that is existential, artistic and courageous.

Keywords: Courage, aims, existential, religious attitude.

Two Sources of Oppression

In this age of measurement many educators feel they are being restricted in their capacity to educate due to spending their energies responding to the interests of managers driven by measures (Giroux, 2007). Our key performance indicators are reduced to data which measure weighted quantities of publications, their impact, the amount of research money won and if student satisfaction ratings are constantly on the rise. By complying with these, educators often submit to the corporate agenda of pursuing market share rather than educating the community. Consequently, becoming embedded in this practice, according to Biesta (2010), can cause us to value what we measure rather than measure what we value. Often this subjection is perceived as a form of oppression which is understood to involve an authoritative oppressor imposing its will, such that one’s freedom to pursue one’s own interests and desires is denied. Hence superficial calls for ‘freedom’ can appear attractive to some who want to throw off the shackles which inhibit them from pursuing what they desire. But Dewey also identified a second and more subtle source of subjection – our own desires. He argued that these can oppress us by being received unquestioningly without investing enough intellectual rigour and without being made personally meaningful. Consequently, these can limit our own growth and limit the sort of active and democratic social life which might be possible.

It is considered worthwhile quoting him at length to better capture his point. He stated,

The chief difficulty [is] ...we do not know what we really want and we make no great effort to find out. We, too, allow our purposes and desires to be foisted upon us from without. We, too, are bored by doing what we want to do, because the want has no deep roots in our own judgement of values ...We yield to one kind of external pressure in doing what we like just as we yield to another kind in having to do what we don’t like. The only difference is that pressure in the latter case is obvious and direct; in the former case it is subtle and indirect. (Dewey, 1988a, p. 133)

This is much like Nietzsche’s notion of ‘slave morality’ which denies experiences for individuals to rise up and create their own values and morals. Biesta (2010, p. 15) confirms this through his observation that “there is very little contemporary work that engages explicitly with questions about what is educationally desirable.” Dewey goes on to explain that we need a sort of critical thinking that is able to discern between values, desires

and purposes deeply enough to understand what makes them valuable – to critically judge their justification and why they might be valuable, or as Nietzsche described – the ‘value of values’ (citation?). Secondly, our thinking also needs to be constructive – or creative – to form our own aims and desires upon intelligent and well-informed warrants. But this critical and constructive thinking requires us to challenge the status quo of the environment and ourselves, and so it depends upon us to have courage.

Measuring up for Education Requires Courage

Regarding aims of education, Dewey (1985) was very specific that education, being an abstract concept, doesn’t have any specific aims of its own but rather it is individual people who have aims. Dewey encourages individuals to appreciate that aims should not be passively received as if they were located only in external sources. Dewey argued that the capacity for individuals to be willing and able to take personal responsibility for intelligently forming their own aims requires the “primary requisite” of courage. This courage is essential for us to overcome our ‘natural’ state of being intellectually lazy (ibid, p. 134). This may strike us as rather accusatory and so perhaps we might want to replace this word lazy with ‘reluctance’ in the sense that conducting an inquiry does not appear to be worth the effort and indeed may well be quite difficult. Exploring the very roots and foundations, that is the whys of what we believe, what makes our values valuable and what justifies the particular desires we have, can be very confrontational in the sense that we begin to question and doubt the very meanings that have given sense to our lives up to this point. Such an inquiry is likely to uncover potential bias in terms of race, politics and especially religion as we dismantle some ‘grand narratives’ that we perhaps have been appealing to in our private closets, simply as a matter of being embedded in the particular family, community and culture in which we find ourselves. We may question whether our people may not be the ‘good guys’ after all, in spite of what our news media and folklore tell us about ourselves. We will certainly need courage if we are to seriously consider if we – the free, democratic and secular West – are actually as ‘enlightened’ as we like to assume and have a right to educate others.

Dewey (1988b, p. 33) identifies that the process of measurement requires things to be specific and isolated in order to allow themselves to be quantified. In contrast he argues that *education* consists of more than just specific skills and knowledge of facts. It pertains to a whole network of other concerns such as desires, tastes and abilities. Consequently, I argue, our aims of education might also be limited in this same way as measurable data, if separated and isolated from spiritual aims. By spiritual I mean the meanings and purposes we give to our lives and commit ourselves to. The process of deepening our roots necessarily requires us to re-evaluate what we believe about *education* – our own particular philosophy of education to which we are drawn. Dewey (1985; 1988a,) is very clear that our philosophy of education which consists of aims and purposes, ought to be something that we as individuals take responsibility for. If the roots of our desires are to be deepened towards achieving a greater unity of our experience and existence then I suggest that inevitably such a deepening must extend to the spiritual. Our understanding of education is intricately involved with how we understand the ultimate meanings and purposes of life. Dewey (1985, p. 248) recognised this with his simple observation that “education ...is identical with the operation of living a life which is fruitful and inherently significant”. Deepening the roots regarding our aims of education will require that we unify them with the way we understand the ultimate purposes of life.

The problematic nature of measurement to separate elements from their unity with the rest of existence is not just limited to the culture of performativity imposed on us by external authorities, but it can also be a problem which limits our own aims of education. Attempting to unify our aims of education with ultimate aims for life can appear daunting because it requires us to enter into existential activities involving some existential anxiety – and this requires courage.

Having the Courage to Face Existential Anxiety

In his teacher preparation course in the late 1940s, Philip Jackson was confronted with the question ‘What is education?’ which he read in Dewey’s book *Experience and Education*. Over the next sixty years he worked to respond to this and reviewed his journey in his own book (2012) *What is Education?* In this work Jackson explains that in order for him to come to grips with forming his own intelligent understanding of education, he was drawn to the spiritual and existential writings of Paul Tillich. Jackson (2012, p. 44) suggests that “both Tillich and Dewey were endorsing an impossible quest” because they both pointed to an existential concern of living well but however, there are no ultimate answers that can provide certainty to this quest. What becomes paramount therefore, is not the actual finding or attainment of answers but rather actually *living the questions* in such a way that one’s way-of-being or way-of-living, becomes enhanced.

Existential anxiety represents the realisation of the potential of our nonbeing. It is often likened to standing on the edge of the abyss looking down into total emptiness and meaninglessness as one confronts one’s own death - alone. It is often evoked when one becomes aware that the meaning and significance of life is uncertain. There are no external or authoritative answers and so the individual is thrown back upon herself in an isolated sense as she is the only one who is able to give her life meaning and purpose. Such a response is always “an existential risk” because “the meaning and fulfilment of our lives is at stake, and not a theoretical judgement which may be refuted sooner or later” (Tillich, 1959, p. 28). To undertake this risk in the midst of existential anxiety requires courage. This is described by Tillich (1980, p. 17) as “courage to affirm oneself in spite of fate and death”.

In appreciation for how difficult it is to endure a prolonged engagement with existential anxiety, Eric Fromm argues that as humans we tend to *fear* deep and profound thinking. He argues that courage is so important to overcome this fear (or ‘intellectual laziness’ to use Dewey’s term) in order for such thinking to occur. The sort of deep thinking which is required for us to intelligently form aims and purposes with deepening roots is difficult because it involves venturing into the existential realm of personally giving one’s own existence some significance in a world of uncertainty. It takes us beyond philosophy as a theoretical and intellectual exercise to one that is lived and therefore existential. According to Tillich (1959, p. 24), philosophy, like theology, becomes “existential through the situation of the philosopher.”

Fromm (1942, p. 91) recognises that “we are fascinated by the growth of freedom from powers *outside* ourselves and are blinded to the fact of *inner* restraints, compulsions and fears”. He argues that we do have the freedom to tackle our internal restraints but unfortunately we tend to fear this freedom because it is difficult to exercise and it results in increasing our existential sense of being a unique individual, who alone is responsible for giving sense and purpose to our own life. This is why he claims that it is important for us to be able to say “no” to powerful authorities and to be willing to be disobedient. Such willingness requires courage and courage itself must be embedded in an aspirational alternative to the current situation. Therefore the courage to be disobedient is not for rebels but for revolutionaries who are driven by an attitude *for* something rather than only *against* something (Fromm, 1981, pp. 20 & 24). Because we are considering an intellectual and existential sort of courage then we need to have constructively and creatively formed a very clear alternative.

So the courage being considered here is not only an intellectual and rational sort but it also has a unity with the whole of our existence – our being. This courage can be understood to equate with the sort of holistic thinking that Heidegger promoted which is far more complex than the simple calculative sort of thinking that has dominated in the West. Heidegger argued that we have inherited this more narrow understanding of calculative and re-presentative thinking since misinterpreting Aristotle’s writing regarding substances and we are now in flight to actively avoid thinking in a profoundly different way. Heidegger (1966, p. 59) associates the ancient Greek understanding of thinking with our will, claiming that “to think is to will, and to will is to think”. He made it clear that it is important to understand “the particular being’s participation in Being” so as to appreciate the more holistic nature of thinking which involves more than the application of rationality to ‘solving’ problems. It is something which is an active part of existential *living* – the physical, psychic and spiritual together (Heidegger, 1968).

Deepening our Educational Aims through a Religious Attitude

Dewey did not promote a 'religion' of sorts but he did recommend a 'religious attitude' and we can see how this might enable us to improve and deepen our aims for education. As we have previously noted through Dewey, the aims of education do not exist as part of the world but are ideas created by people – preferably by each individual. It has been argued that these should not exist in isolation from our other purposes and ideas and so to deepen the roots of such aims they should be integrated and even unified with our other understandings regarding our ultimate meanings. Dewey referred to this attempt to unify our ideals into a whole as involving a religious attitude.

Many of Dewey's ideas go back to Greek concepts – including understanding the role of ultimate meanings of life. He states that,

Plato's starting point is that the organisation of society depends ultimately upon knowledge of the end of existence... Unless we know the end, the good, we shall have no criterion for rationally deciding what the possibilities are which should be promoted, nor how social arrangements are to be ordered. (Dewey, 1985, p. 94)

Here Dewey explains that rational thinking does not exist separately to spiritual beliefs regarding the end purposes of existence. This same point is repeated by Heidegger (1968, p. 10) who reports that "nothing religious is ever destroyed by logic". Because reason and religion should not be dichotomized there is an invitation to consider how our logical aims of education might be deepened through an engagement with the religious or spiritual. For some, this might require courage to undertake a venture into the religious aspect of experience.

Engaging rationality, ethics and politics with religion was considered quite normal in ancient Greece. According to Gadamer (1999, p. 39) "The religious vocabulary that they [Greeks] took over, and especially the predicate of divinity, is not intended to make a statement about god or the gods, but rather to designate the order of being about which they are inquiring; the whole, the all, being." Deepening the roots of the aims, purposes and desires of these Greeks involved attempting to unify these ideas with their ultimate ideas relating to living a good and meaningful life.

Gadamer (1999, pp. 28-30) identifies that "'virtue' [did] not consist merely in knowledge" but rather on "the way of life" and "moral consciousness" that was required to attain *eudaimonia* – the good life. Of central importance was the attitude by which they made sense of and gave meaning. This attitude, according to Dewey, provides the religious dimension to experience and so without it, our experience – and our being (including our aims, purposes and desires) – would be somewhat impoverished. He consequently described the "unreligious attitude" as separating and isolating ideas and ideals from each other, making mankind isolated "from the world of physical nature and his fellows" (Dewey, 1934, p. 25). Such an attitude which separates and isolates as characteristic of our age of measurement, lacks the courage to deepen the roots which form the justifications and reasons for desiring and aspiring to the things we value most. Measurement encourages an unreligious attitude.

This religious attitude of Dewey's can be understood as being necessarily courageous. It represents one's character as one attempts to unify a sense of self and a good life, which simultaneously involves ones reasoning, aspirations, actions and emotions. There is a recognised pursuit of the 'good' through this religious dimension which is also described as "morality touched by emotion". To use some terms that are considered typically religious Dewey describes this attitude as devotion and as the combination of faith and élan. So Dewey's (1934, pp. 8 7 10) religious attitude doesn't involve promoting a religion but instead "it denotes attitudes that may be taken towards every object and every proposed end or ideal" to determine "significant moments of living" which reference life as a whole.

Courageously Measuring up for Education Requires us to be Artful

In order to determine significance for life and for education, our aims, purposes and desires need to be re-evaluated and formed intelligently and responsibly. Aims of education cannot be accepted passively from

external authorities. Dewey (1938, p. 67) reminds us that Plato's definition of a slave was one who "executes the purposes of another" and so if educators are not to become slaves, we need to be moved by our *own* purposes. Dewey challenges us in this regard with this confronting statement,

Until educators get the independence and courage to insist that educational aims are to be *formed* as well as executed within the educative process, they will not come to consciousness of their own function. Others will then have no great respect for educators because educators do not respect their own social place and work." [my emphasis] (Dewey, 1988b, p. 38)

Here Dewey advises that before we can attempt to challenge and potentially change the world through education in some way, we firstly need to courageously and intelligently form educational purposes and aims. Not only do these aims require intelligent inquiry but Dewey also recognises that this process requires courage. In performance-driven environments it can take a great deal of personal courage to guide the attention of managing authorities to the intellectual method which centres *educational* aims and purposes and thus be able to pursue an agenda for education rather than just securing market share. We live in a time described by Blake et al. (2000) as being nihilistic because many educational institutions do not have any meaningful purposes and aims for education, but instead are myopically focussed on effective management of measurable performance indicators. This can be observed on the websites of most Australian universities where great celebrations appears to be given to managing effectively and little is articulated regarding the educative role of the institution.

According to Dewey the formation of any aim will not suffice in order to measure up for education, but only those aims which have deep roots. The sort of depth he was referring to not only involves a philosophical inquiry by individual educators into the justification of values, but it also involves engaging with the religious aspect of experience which is existential in nature. He adds that a philosophy which accepts the uncertainty and mystery of life "and turns that experience upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities" can be understood to be a form of art. Indeed he concludes that "art is thus prefigured in the very process of living" (Dewey, 1989, pp. 30 & 41). It is interesting to note the "enemies" he identifies to such a process of living for which courage is required to fight, include "the humdrum, slackness ... submission ... tightness ... incoherence and aimless indulgence" (Dewey, 1989, p. 47). Creating aims, purposes and desires which give unity to life with its various components of spirit and the flesh requires us to be artful.

Bauman echoes Dewey's point above in the title of his book *The Art of Life* in which he demonstrates that we are all artists of our own lives whether we like it or not. Each of us actively relate to some meaning and purpose for our existence. He therefore challenges his readers to be good artists by courageously transcending superficial understandings of happiness which tend to dominate our taken-for-granted and everyday lives. This requires exercising some deep and philosophical thinking regarding the ultimate purposes for life and so he acknowledges the appropriateness of descriptors such as a noble mind, strong character and nerves of steel – all of which seem to indicate the importance of courage while engaging with existential anxiety. He reviews some thinkers through time – one of whom is Pascal. Bauman (2008, p. 37) states that "Pascal suggests that people avoid looking inwards and keep running in the vain hope of escaping a face-to-face encounter with their predicament, which is to face up to their utter insignificance whenever they recall the infinity of the universe." Bauman then says that most people actually desire and enjoy being seduced by superficial pleasures.

Bauman therefore warns against self-interest which appears central to seeking happiness via gratification on a superficial and sensual level because this usually is a disservice to the way we live in the long term and adversely affects those around us. Such self-interest orients us to seek only the satisfaction of our desires and fails to provide the impetus to critically review the desires themselves and whether they are good for us and for those with whom our lives interact. Desires are, then, often accepted as natural or normal. This leads Bauman (2008, p. 40) to give serious attention to the importance of love in its tendency to "abandon self-concern" and contribute to a meaningful life through actively working for the good of others. There is obviously a parallel here with the vocation of education which involves working for the good or rather the 'betterment' of students, and, as most teachers will attest, paying less attention to our own self-concerns.

Educating Others to have the Courage to Measure up to be Educated

Biesta (2010, p. 26) has argued that if educators are to educate in this age of measurement then there is a need for us to “reconnect with the question of purpose in education”. Through Dewey we recognise that being able to educate doesn’t just require freedom from externally imposed, performance-driven agendas, but as individual educators we also need to have well-formed and deep rooted aims and desires for education. I have suggested that part of the deepening process of the roots to our aims and purposes of education, will involve us venturing into the existential dimension as to what makes our own lives meaningful and purposeful and have argued that this can be understood as an aspect of Dewey’s religious attitude. Dewey has identified that courage is the ‘primary requisite’ for critically and constructively forming aims for education which have deep roots, and I have reviewed how this courage plays a particularly important role in enabling us to face some existential anxiety as we take it upon ourselves to engage with making our own lives take on some significance and purpose in the face of uncertainty as we aim to educate the very desires that we live by.

While we ought to continually re-evaluate the desires and aims that we live by, we are also involved in educating the desires of our students. Dewey (1938) referred to this ‘collateral learning’ as the forming of attitudes which are the most important aspect of the educative process. It is the actual attitudes and interests of the student which are to become educated (Pring, 2004). Not only does education involve the acquisition of knowledge and skills but it also involves the formation of attitudes – including desires, values and purposes. Garrison (2010, pp. xiii, xvi, 88, 107) recognises that Dewey’s approach centres upon *eros* which specifically engages with the interests and desires of students because ultimately “we become what we love. Our destiny is in our desires...” and therefore educators should enable students to discriminate between different desires and the consequences of these desires in order that “those that are genuinely desirable” can be embodied in a better way of life.

Dewey (1988b, p. 38) considered that “education is itself a process of discovering what values are worth while and are to be pursued as objectives.” He also recognised that what is already valued by external authorities and our internal selves tend to be powerful, because they are rooted upon the desires and aims of the status quo. Therefore he calls for us to be willing enough to engage with a religious attitude which is courageous, and to be “militant” enough “to fight” for a re-evaluation of the value of our desires, aims and purposes so as to live as intelligently as possible (Dewey, 1934, p. 77). This approach to education is considered necessary to enable our lives and the lives of our students to be as valuable as possible.

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