TRUST AS THE AIM OF EDUCATION

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Abstract

Growth as cumulative action requires trust as a basis for judgment and decisions to act. Education is a means by which trust, in ongoing and ever changing circumstances, may be reliably established. Trust is the aim of education. Pointing this out to participants in systems of schooling like those in Australia may help resolve some issues they face in their practice.

Keywords: trust, aim, practice, Dewey, Wittgenstein

> For every complex problem there is a simple solution that is wrong
> H.L. Mencken

Introduction

One word answers to complex questions run the risk of being wrong or, at best, misleading. However they may also serve as an axis around which a whole complex of beliefs and actions revolve. Pointing this out to participants may help them resolve some issues they face in their practice.

The beguiling simple question 'What is the aim of education?' has been given a range of answers over time that have rendered themselves open to one word versions, among which are variations on ' harmony', 'salvation', 'growth'. The attraction of providing one word answers is increased by the form of this question that appears to presuppose that there is one, definitive answer. 'Social justice' is ruled out because it is two words and supporters would probably claim that, while it is important, it is not the only aim of education. A multiplicity of aims does not seem to be contemplated by this question. The multiplicity of answers given so far seems to indicate that none of them have attracted universal acceptance yet they continue to attract some attention from those concerned with educating.

At the risk of being wrong, misleading, or unhelpful, it is proposed here that 'trust' may be considered the aim of an education. This claim is based on some assumptions not shared by many of those who have proposed answers in the past or by those currently engaged in education. One such assumption is that 'trust' is a more useful concept than 'truth' upon which to seek an understanding of and an improvement in our practices, including education.

A feature of the one word answers is that they may be interpreted to contemplate different types of relation between a person and their experienced world. 'Harmony' and 'growth' can be given a conservative interpretation in which the person is to adjust to outside requirements or be given an active interpretation in which they seek to adjust an aspect of their experienced world. 'Salvation' on the

other hand usually does not assume that the requirements for salvation are negotiable. "Salvation' does have a definitive determination but whether 'harmony' or 'growth' are achieved or progress is made towards their achievement is problematic. It may be helpful to distinguish been task and achievement senses of these words (Marshall, J.D. 2009) in consideration of the aim of education. 'Salvation' and 'growth' happen to the person whereas 'harmony' is a relation between the person and the experienced world. 'Trust' is relational but, unlike 'salvation' and 'truth', it has both a task sense and an achievement sense realisable within a person's lifetime.

One further preliminary point of clarification, 'education' may be one of many aims and purposes of formal compulsory schooling. The practical outcome of establishing an acceptable answer to the question 'What is the aim of education?' is that it can be used to help critique the practice of schooling, in its compulsory stage as well as activity before and after that stage.

Growth

Dewey , J. (1966) stated that in a democratic society

> … the aim of education is to enable individuals to continue their education – or that the object and reward of learning is continued capacity for growth. (p.100)
> In directing the activities of the young, society determines its own future in determining that of the young…. this cumulative movement of action toward a later result is what is meant by growth. (p. 41)
> Three ideas which have been criticized, namely, the merely primitive nature of immaturity, static adjustment to a fixed environment, and rigidity of habit, are all connected with a false idea of growth or development, - that it is a movement toward a fixed goal. Growth is regarded as *having* an end, instead of *being* an end. (p. 50)

One concern with 'growth' as the aim/end of education is that education alone is not sufficient for growth. Health, adequate resources, and a conducive physical and social environment would also appear to be contributors to growth. 'Growth' may be an aim/end of life but it seems a bit overstated to assert it is the aim of education when growth is not a discernable outcome of education. Insofar as growth is the aim of life and education contributes to life, so it shares that aim with other contributors. Another way of asking the question is 'What is the distinctive aim of education?' What is it that education contributes to the common aim that other contributors do not and, when identified, may help us better critique and improve our practices?

By rejecting a fixed goal for educational growth, Dewey seems to describe as education/growth whatever happens insofar as it is the cumulative movement of action towards a (any) later result. If the notion of growth does not provide any limitation on what series of actions lead to whatever result then education as merely providing the capacity for future action seems problematic. Even although democratic society is an assumed precondition for this conception of education as growth, such unconstrained action could lead to the destruction of the democratic

society that spawned it. It may be seen to value longer lives or more capacity for action 'continued capacity for growth'. It does not seem to provide a way to decide whether the life was worth living. One way to address the matter would be to provide personal recommendations, based on cogent argument, for the adoption of such things as scientific problem solving and care for self and others.

Trust

> 150. How does someone judge which is his right and which is his left hand? How do I know that my judgment will agree with someone else's? How do I know that this colour is blue? If I don't trust *myself* here, why should I trust anyone else's judgment? Is there a why? Must I not begin to trust somewhere? That is to say: somewhere I must begin with not-doubting; and that is not, so to speak, hasty but excusable: it is part of judging.
> Wittgenstein, L. (1972, p. 22e)

We begin life trusting those things we experience in the inchoate form they present themselves to us. Trust is our default setting although then, as now, it is largely unwitting. As we extend our experiences and begin willful action we become aware of mistakes and doubt occurs. At some point, in order to act, we need to make judgments in doubtful circumstances.

> 140. We do not learn the practice of making empirical judgments by learning rules: we are taught *judgments* and their connection with other judgments. A *totality* of judgments is made plausible to us.
> 141. When we first begin to *believe* anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole).
> 142. It is not single axioms that strike me as obvious, it is a system in which consequences and premises give one another *mutual* support.
> Wittgenstein, L. (1972, p. 21e)

In the context of biological responses to the environment and habit formation, young persons learn to make the judgements trusted by those around them. As part of that process they make mistakes and doubt their understanding and/or competence. They learn to make trustworthy judgements. Empirical judgments are only part of what is required to take action. Normative judgments and conceptual understandings combined with technical competence and the will to act appropriately are also requirements.

What we encounter are practices (systems) of human endeavour in which we are taught judgments, what to do, how to do it well, and (perhaps) why it is worth doing. As the light dawns slowly over, if not the whole at least a sizeable portion of it, initial trust needs to be maintained, extended and made more robust. Appropriate ways of dealing with doubt and an understanding of acting on various levels of trust need to be acquired.

A long held view requires us to seek truth as the basis for judgement. Truth is taken to be independent of the self and, once established, immutable. In some circumstances when judgement and/or action are required, time and evidence to establish truth are not available so truth may be regarded as an optional extra.

Trust is relational and nested in a specific practice located in time and space. Trust is fragile and requires maintenance. Trust is also accompanied by commitment.

Aim

An aim seems to admit of both a linear and a non-linear interpretation whereas a goal seems to assume a target or a more achievable outcome. An aim may serve as an organising intention for activity designed to achieve an identified outcome or as Dewey (above) said 'having an end.' This is linear in that the action is from the aim to the outcome or goal. A non-linear aim may be a constitutive element that helps gives direction, coherence and a sense of worthwhile purpose to an activity or as Dewey (above) said '*being* an end'.

A non-linear interpretation of aim, aim in itself, being an end, an ultimate justification, etc., does not serve as a major premise that requires justification in a deduction leading to action. Nor is it necessary for a participant in an activity to be aware of, critically scrutinise, or otherwise justify the aim in order to participate rationally, properly or effectively in an activity.

One way to comprehend a non-linear aim is to compare it to an axis.

152. I do not explicitly learn the propositions that stand fast for me. I can *discover* them subsequently like the axis around which a body rotates. This axis is not fixed in the sense that anything holds it fast, but the movement around it determines its immobility.
Wittgenstein, L. (1972, p.22e)

The aim of education may be likened to the axis around which the practice of education rotates in a mutually supportive way.

Another way to comprehend a non-linear aim is to see it as a Backing for Warrants that justify the application of Grounds to a Conclusion in an Argument (Toulmin, et al. 1979). A Backing is a rule, generalisation, aim or suchlike that make it proper or trustworthy or to argue in a particular way. Backings are accepted (if unwittingly by many participants) elements of a practice or tradition that are shared by participants and without which the practice could not be conducted or the language used in it understood.

The aim of education. if seen as a Backing, legitimates various Warrants that justify the relevance of some Grounds rather than others for the logical adequacy of an argument for a Conclusion. It has been thought that when a logically adequate Argument (one in which the strength of the Conclusion was matched by the strength of the Grounds) was identified, only then would the truth of the Grounds need to be

tested to see if the Argument was acceptable. It is my contention that truth is only applicable to certain classes of Grounds even if, in principle, truth is something accessible to an inquirer. Instead, I claim, what is required of a sound Argument is that the Grounds are trustworthy. Truth (as warranted assertability) is an appropriate basis for trust in certain matters. Hence trust is the central issue in rational thought and action.

Like an axis or Backing, a non-linear aim cannot be justified from within the practice. It is bedrock on which the thrust for justification is turned. One has no need for recourse to elephants, turtles or monkeys to 'satisfy' an inquiry. A justification for the aim may be possible from another perspective. While the aim of education cannot be given an educational justification, instead an economic or political or historical or moral or aesthetic or other justification may be sought.

Trust as the aim of education

Growth as cumulative action requires trust as a basis for judgment and decisions to act. Education is a means by which trust, in ongoing and ever changing circumstances, may be reliably established.

The point of identifying trust as the aim of education is that thereby, trust can be used as basis for clarifying and evaluating the educational value of the practice of schooling. Growth as cumulative action values ongoing action but not that the action is good, so additional argument was required by Dewey to advocate such things as democratic problem solving and the use of scientific method. Trust is located in the specifics of a situation and carries an expectation that trust is placed in what is more trustworthy rather than in the less trustworthy. Trust as the aim of education emphasises the role of educators to teach the best of what is available in the society and produce the best practitioners for a better society. Dewey, had he espoused trust rather than growth as the aim of education, could have entitled his work 'Democracy and American Education'.[i]

Fundamentally, emphasis on the role of trust as the aim of education in systems of schooling like those in contemporary Australia enables an educational critique of the assumptions underpinning the officially sanctioned practices. Assumptions in need of critique are that success of the Australian schooling system is to be measured in PISA test scores, in growth of Australian GDP, and in the Government retaining power. Trust provides an alternative to the assumption that schooling is to provide an identified and mandated set of skills, knowledge, attitudes and values that will equip the young to enter the workforce and be productive contributors throughout their lifetime. In a future that is more likely to see increasing numbers of wholly adequate persons unable to find meaningful paid employment for much or all of their life, the current dominant assumptions condemn schools, teachers and students to an exercise in frustration.

Responsibility

Trust as the aim of education shifts the responsibility to the school, teacher and student to identify what is trustworthy rather than accept the imposition by

authorities of the mandated curriculum. This is not to revert back to an individualist 1960s 'do your own thing' or relativist 'anything goes'. It is to emphasise the responsibility to establish trust relations between the individual and the world mediated by the best practice of the relevant community.

Schooling authorities have a significant role to play in providing curriculum resources to assist those educating and thus avoiding the 1970s mistake of leaving it to schools or individual teachers or each student to identify what is worth knowing or doing, how to do it, and whether it has been done well. It is the responsibility of authorities, in schooling as in any other practice or tradition, to identify and maintain the defining assumptions, concepts, values, standards and way of doing things of that evolving practice. [ii] It is also their responsibility to identify where there are legitimate alternatives, where there is uncertainty, and where there is controversy. They are responsible for enabling participants' handling of these aspects of the practice so as to permit trust to be established and effective.

It is the responsibility of schools, within the bounds of the practice, to establish an environment conducive to students establishing appropriate trust relations and to facilitate the role of teachers to adapt the school approach to meet the identified needs of the individuals in their class in terms of the trust relations in the various communities in which they participate.

It is the responsibility of the students to be the best person they can and that judged in terms of being a trustworthy participant in the various communities of practice in which they engage.

Research

Research into schooling could seek to identify general patterns of trust relations central to schooling, how these are maintained, why they break down, and how they may be improved. Teachers' knowledge research could focus on the trust relations of teachers and where and how attention to aspects of those relations could improve teaching practice. The results of such research could be used to inform teacher education programs and enable inexperienced teachers to focus on the trust relations central to the success of their practice.

Research in a school could seek to identify the particular trust relations in the school, classroom and community. The results of such research could be used by the schools to focus its attention on maintaining and improving those relations as a central feature of its accountability to the community. Instead of constructing league tables of test results on a limited range items, reporting of student progress, teacher efficacy and school adequacy could be made in terms of indicators related to crucial trust relations.

Research into curriculum could seek to identify the trust relations in the subject practice and how best to assist students become proficient in them. This could facilitate a shift of focus towards enabling students to make trustworthy judgements in the curriculum subjects. Instead of applying the results of rat behaviour research

on students, psychological and social research could focus on the central trust relations (personal and intellectual) involved in developing their capacity for growth.

Consequences

A reductionist, verificationist approach to schooling, like that dominant in Australia today, tends to shift the focus away from education towards an economic and political axis with emphasis on skills and social control.

A focus on trust as the aim of education could enable a more holistic and relational approach to the role and operation of schooling, seen more as a community of inquiry responsive to the needs of students in their various communities of practice.

A focus on trust as the aim of education may help schools and teachers in their role 'directing the activities of the young, [whereby] society determines its own future in determining that of the young.' (Dewey, J. 1966, p. 41)

Establishing and maintaining trust in schools and society would seem to be both a necessary and a worthwhile enterprise.

References

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Endnotes

[i] Although not so in Dewey's time, Americans now see a need to proclaim their trust on their money.

[ii] If anyone in Australia should still be in doubt that practices deal with controversies and evolve, then it may be sufficient to remind them that Australia has accepted marriage equality but 50 years ago homosexuality was a criminal offence in Australia and that in some societies it is punishable by death.