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QUALITY THROUGH HOLISTIC SIMPLICITY

Abstract

It seems as though the publication of *The Oxford handbook of philosophy of education* (Siegel, 2009) had evoked considerable discourse in the fields of philosophy and philosophy of education. The tensions and inconsistencies that were exposed between and within these fields prompted the question about the role of philosophy of education in the *practice* of education and teacher education. With a contingent exploration using hermeneutic phenomenology I have attempted to initiate a tentative resolution to this challenge – one that we may trust enough to base our actions upon. It reveals a conceptualisation of education and subsequently teacher education, which holistically encapsulates its quality imperative and its associated concerns like social justice and accountability.

Key words: Conceptualisation of education, Education in practice, Community of truth, Authentic learning, Authentic pedagogy, Facilitating learning

Introduction

The publication of the *Handbook* edited by Siegel (2009a; 2009b) had sparked off an interesting discourse which is evident in, at least, White's (2013) response to the *Handbook* and the subsequent responses of Cuypers (2014), Howe (2014), Laverty (2014), Biesta (2014) and also Siegel's (2014) reply to White's (2013) response. My concern about the discourse is, among others, the tension and inconsistencies between and within philosophy and philosophy of education, as well as the inconsistent and widely divided focus propagated by different philosophers within the latter. Since no system or policy on whichever level, whether political, economic, social and even educational – however exceptional it might be – is capable of ensuring the quality of education but the human beings participating in the phenomenon as it happens *in practice*, it seems as though that an intended philosophical consensus "has not been reached in philosophy of education" (Waks, 2014, p. 279) and that the role of philosophy of education in the "major implications for educational aims and practices" (Hirst, 2008, p. 307), may be in jeopardy.

Where should our exploration start to resolve this dilemma?

Concerning the *quality* of education, we first need to conceptualise *education*. Learning defines the 'structure' of education because "when children are exploring, experimenting, making their own discoveries, as they are innately impelled to do, their natural [neural network] structures are growing and connecting. These physical structures are the new higher-level knowledge and skill they are acquiring" (Smilkstein, 2011, p. 76). Learning is, therefore, neuroscientifically physical. However, 'nature' of learning is authentic (Lombardi, 2007) because children learn through being in constant interaction with the environment's real-life, meaning-demanding, problem-solving challenges. Even though the requisite knowledge and skills for resolving the real-life challenges are not available, the ontology of learning

compels their authentic finding, acquisition and construction – so aptly described by Frankl (1984, p. 121): "Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a 'secondary rationalization' of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance, which will satisfy his own *will* to meaning". This confirms the constructivist epistemology (Von Glasersfeld, 2008) and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning as a natural human phenomenon.

What is the qualitative nature of authentic learning?

The authentic learning environment is powerful because real-life demands making sense of continuously increasing novel domains and levels of complexity of life – including the transition between 'everyday' life and all the phases of 'formal educational' life – within which increasingly new levels of meaning have to be constructed. However, real-life does not discriminate in the demands it poses and inadvertently the participation of the whole human being – body, mind, soul and spirit – is usurped by the challenging experience of living real-life in its uncompromising complexity. Dewey (1897) said that education is not a preparation for future life; it is life itself, and that learning, thus, more often than not is "hard and protracted, confusing and frustrating… [it] involves exhilarating spurts, frustrating plateaus and upsetting regressions… Even when learning is going smoothly, there is always the possibility of surprise, confusion, frustration, disappointment or apprehension – as well, of course, as fascination, absorption, exhilaration, awe and relief" (Claxton, 1999, pp. 15-16). Under these conditions, the learner is transformed to other ways of knowing and higher realms of being and this transformation is rewarded by the hormonal excretions of the brain with what Zull (2011, pp. 53-80) calls "the deepest joy".

Authentic learning is, therefore, a matter of personal quality: The personal challenge compels the desire to create a resolution of the highest possible quality, and, why would one forfeit experiencing the deepest joy of the highest possible level of self-transcendence and its infinite possibilities? This authentic experience and the ultimate construction of the meaning thereof as well as the subsequent trans-formation takes place in the individual. No one can experience or do this for or on behalf of another human being – irrespective of the origin or kind of learning stimuli and context (social or otherwise).

Authentic learning can thus be defined as the construction of meaning by learners themselves through resolving authentic, real-life, problem-solving challenges and the exhilarating result that provides the will to engage in the resolution of an even more demanding, subsequent real-life challenge.

Why are we endowed with such a unique drive to learn authentically?

According to Heidegger (1962), at birth, we are 'thrown' into this world with its overwhelming corporate forces, voices and texts that conform us to deceptive, inauthentic being. Simply stated, authenticity is the degree to which one is prudently true to one's own talents, character, spirit and possibilities despite the continuous onslaught of external forces. Although the term 'authenticity' may be out of fashion, Barnett (2007, p. 40) maintains that 'authenticity' is perhaps the key concept within

the deep structure of education and then continues to claim that "education that does not call, does not insist, on authenticity in the student is no education". Our ontological quest is to reclaim our authenticity that must be "fought for, won and sustained". Education, then, is a lifelong enterprise enhanced by an environment that supports or, more precisely, 'nourishes' to the greatest extent possible the attempts of all people to 'find themselves' throughout their lives (Ackoff & Greenberg, 2008, p. 14).

This requires personal development of the highest order that demands hard work, courage, honesty and integrity to find the deep, cellular commitments of authentic being. "These cellular commitments are the burning fuse of purpose that snakes through our lives, always focused on the explosive realization of our full human potential and eventual self-transcendence" (De Quincey, 2005, p. 58). When this purpose is not fulfilled a kind of gnawing emptiness, longing, frustration and displaced anger takes over with dreadful results.

This is in stark contrast with the acquisition of knowledge and skills as educational purpose reflected in our dominating education practices. Within this context, Barnett (2007) states that knowledge and skills – that originated in the *past* – cannot even begin to provide the foundation on which to construct our education for the 21st century. They provide only two pillars: the epistemological and the practical. "By themselves… these two pillars will topple over: they need (at least) a third pillar – the ontological pillar – to ensure any kind of stable structure" (Barnett, 2007, p. 7). Even though the function of the ontological pillar is identified as a *stabilising* one, the relationship between it and the other two requires more consideration.

Besides the fact that the future is, and will forever be, unknown, the exponential rapidity of the changing world – it's character, intensity and felt impact – has resulted in a 'supercomplex' world we have in common of which there is "a multiplication of incompatible differences of interpretation" (Barnett, 2004, p. 249) that is "radically unknowable" (Weinberger, 2012). It is because that, by extension 'I', who do not have and cannot get the future's knowledge and skills to resolve its challenges when it comes, is 'inadequate' in that sense, and has lost the sense of *being* in the world that *education* becomes vital – but with an ontological turn.

What are the consequences for education?

Education is, in principle, not an epistemological task for the acquisition of knowledge and skills but is primarily, an ontological challenge for the trans-formation of the human being, nothing less (Barnett, 2007, p. 252). The quality of this is obviously non-negotiable.

Within this context, education needs to feature "a learning understood neither in terms of knowledge or skills but of human *qualities* and *dispositions*" (Barnett, 2004, p. 247) because the latter "are durable in their nature. They constitute the student's pedagogical being. It is they that have to be the focus [of our education]" (Barnett, 2007, p. 102). The attainment of the qualities and dispositions referred to earlier are those that generate a drive towards authenticity and make authentic being possible. If these human qualities are to be achieved, education requires "a trans-formatory curriculum and pedagogy" (Barnett, 2004, p. 259).

Irrespective of the particular discipline, module or subject that provides the particular context within which the real-life challenge is designed, the *curriculum* would essentially be the attainment of essential human dispositions and qualities: the way that we want students to *be* – dispositions and the way we want students to *become* – qualities. With *will* as the learner's primary motivation in life and thus the foundational disposition with all other dispositions and qualities building upon it, the ontological quest is clear: "Through their dispositions and their qualities, students have the capacities to acquire both knowledge and skills. Through their dispositions and qualities, students become themselves… Without dispositions and qualities, nothing else of any substance is possible: Learning is not possible, the acquisition of skills is not possible, and nor is any independence of action or thought possible" (Barnett, 2007, p. 101).

The ontological pillar is, therefore, not only the stabilising pillar but indeed, the *fundamental* pillar, providing the capability of generating the other two. Since dispositions and qualities resemble virtues so closely, the former may become inclusive of essential human virtues that must be attained to make authentic being possible. Despite criticism regarding virtues and the associated issues, their educational value when they are defined as ethical competences of moral excellence is significant. The critical question is: What is the educational context within which these essential human virtues are realised? The answer lies in the result of our exploration of authentic learning.

Authentic learning as education

Living the virtues (values/character) exhibits an understanding of what is truly important, worthwhile and advantageous in life when the *relevant* features in a situation are identified accurately providing the ability to make the best corresponding choices for maintaining a flourishing life.

Therefore, the degree of quality is determined by *phronesis* or practical wisdom. A degree of 'unsophisticated purity' may be expected from young children and with increasing maturity, the increase in the sophistication of practical wisdom should be expected to affect *eudaimonia*: living a quality life. The key to attaining virtues and exhibiting *phronesis* to achieve *eudaimonia* is that "it characteristically comes only with experience of life" (Hursthouse, 2013, Online) – exactly the context that authentic learning provides.

Education cannot put the severed artificial fragments of reality (disciplines, modules, subjects, etc.) that it created, back together again by 'bringing in' a small selection thereof to an educational event. It is also unnecessary because real-life in its uncompromising supercomplexity is in itself already *authentically* holistic: Living *life* in an educational institution invariably demands exhibiting *social justice* and being *accountable* for all actions, which always have consequences.

What does a transformatory pedagogy entail?

Teacher education is determined to the fullest extent by its purpose in that it should embody transformative, authentic pedagogy. But there are two requisites: If authentic learning is about knowing myself, then "knowing myself is as crucial to good 'teaching' as knowing my subject and my students… it is a secret hidden in

plain sight" (Palmer, 2007, pp. 2-3). Subsequently teachers should be 'taught' in the manner they are expected to 'teach'. However, it should be obvious that authentic learning has an alien ring to one of our most treasured assumptions regarding education, when Oscar Wilde (1894, pp. 533-534) says that "it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught". Authentic learning for the attainment of essential virtues as the focus of education can only be *facilitated*.

Facilitating learning (Slabbert, De Kock & Hattingh, 2009) is the authentic pedagogy that "helps students from all backgrounds substantially" (Newman, Marks & Gamoran, 1995, p. 8), the "antipedagogical inversion" of teaching (Freudenthal, 1991, p. 48) and the practical wisdom of education. It is a pedagogy based not on abstract theoretical knowledge "but it's very opposite: knowledge of concrete particulars… situation-specific principles, context dependent, that help them to rapidly arrive at decisions that solve practical problems" (Korthagen, 2001, p. 200, 255). Facilitating learning is a pedagogy that is identified through this befitting description by Heidegger (1968, p. 15): "The real teacher, in fact, lets nothing else be learned than – learning. His conduct, therefore, often produces the impression that we properly learn nothing from him".

Facilitating learning initiates and ensures the maintenance of learners' authentic learning through a continuous, systematic process of *content void* and an increase in the levels of *quality-demanding* challenges (critical assessment of the learning) with appropriate *emotional* encouragement and support until the highest possible *quality* of learning and subsequent personal transformation has been achieved through the learners' personal efforts. The *quality* imperative is again undeniable.

That is why the community (the social structure of a pedagogical event) of truth (Gr. Aletheia=unconcealment, disclosure, discover) (Palmer, 2007, pp. 89-113) is the firmest foundation of education of which the hallmark is our commitment and willingness to submit our observations, constructions, assumptions, theories – indeed ourselves – to the community's ruthless scrutiny. Although this can never provide ultimate certainty, it can certainly rescue us from ignorance, bias, egotism, and self-deception to maintain a flourishing life, possible only through the requirement that Socrates states: An unexamined life is not worth living. The continuous demand for *quality, social justice* and *accountability* is inescapable in this context.

From this exploration, education may be conceptualised as follows: Education is creating the most powerful learning environment possible that evokes learners' empowerment to maximise (completely develop and fully utilise) their human potential (essential human virtues) through facilitating (demanding the highest possible quality) lifelong, authentic learning (resolving real-life challenges) in order to create a safe, sustainable and flourishing future for all – a quality imperative. This would also be the aim of education.

Conclusion

This tentative conceptualisation exposes education's innate quality imperative that encapsulates social justice and accountability in a holistic simplicity of outcomes in *practice* liberating its conception from the limitations of the inconsistent current discourse in philosophy of education.

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