

The Urgencies of Democratic Education: Public Spheres and Moral Compasses

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An informed, civically active, and ethical public is the irrefutable and enormously powerful progeny of education. This educational project is critical and urgent in a world where autocracies, kleptocracies, and thugocracies abound; where in an age of instantaneous access to universes of data and information, we are diminished and at times, corrupted daily by the deleteriousness and malaise of disinformation and “organised lying” (Arendt, 2006)[1]; where the erosion of democratic norms and values is ubiquitous and palpable. This paper proceeds from the premise that education should be antidote to authoritarianism and serve as a sustained agent and custodian for the flourishing and progress of democratic society. Educators need to engage ongoingly to the values and practices of democratic pedagogies and learning, and to understand the abiding principles and responsibilities to design and practice teaching approaches that develop and elaborate the democratic capacities of students. Such principles and responsibilities are founded on a recognition that learning for democratic participation is a fact of the unbounded classroom; that is, a classroom constituted by equal measures of inside and outside the physical site of institutionalized education. The Deweyan principle of democracy and education (Dewey, 1966)[2] articulates contemporary pedagogical urgencies to develop collective intelligences of openness, critical engagement, and deliberative decision-making. Indeed, the university’s core mission is citizenship where knowledge is not only forged and transferred, but also activated and mobilized as an instigator of social change. It is a site where students learn of their capacities to “influence the public sphere and enhance public discourse.” (Ashworth, 2020;10)[3], or stated simply, where students learn that their studies have consequence in the world. This paper offers a critical exploration of practices toward democratic education and the necessity of the embeddedness of a democratic ethos in the design, development, and practices of university teaching and learning.

Keywords: democratic education, unbounded classroom, citizenship, public discourse

1. Introduction

Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.
John Dewey (Boydston, 2008)[4]

The stakes in education are always high, but in fraught and calamitous times when the foundations of democracy are being eroded or under siege, education has become a crucible, a critical and hugely consequential site in the constant renewal and advance of democratic norms and values. Education is irrefutably the sustenance of democracy, and ultimately the means toward a robust, just, and compassionate civic culture and society. Democratically conceived and enacted education stands in opposition to authoritarianism, and critical thinking is a clear and present danger to demagogues everywhere. To borrow terminology from Hannah Arendt, and interpreted by Henry Giroux, “thinking dangerously”—comprehensively informed and critical thinking in projects of social change, a danger to autocracy (Arendt, 1977; Giroux, 2022)[5][6]—is surely an educational aspiration. The goal is to develop autonomous and responsible student citizens capable of understanding, questioning, and acting upon the social, political and economic structures, conditions, and issues of their time, to see themselves as protagonists with agency and responsibility in their own lives.

There is no disciplinary franchise on pedagogies and learning for agency. In the debasement of political discourse and the deterioration of civic culture, in the ideological foreclosures of science and reason, in the denial of fact, indeed reality, all disciplines in institutions of higher learning are on the front lines of the custodianship and expansion of civic literacy and must be exemplars of democratic education.

This account of democracy and education will offer principles and practices as well as key constitutive elements of education that are deliberative, participatory, argumentative, and critical. It will understand democratic education to be both purpose and practice, theory and application, concept and method.

2. Literacies

Educational literacies, and especially media literacy, have received considerable theorization and analysis, and properly so. Much contemporary educational design is driven and organized around the idea and goals of literacies, and ongoing calls for educational reform are in no small measure motivated by the recognition that educational literacies are central to the success of curriculum design, programmatic structure and content, and pedagogical approach and invention. In their formulation of “critical media literacy”, Kellner and Share argue that the complexities and accelerated pace of change in the 21st century demand a reconstructed approach to education and to pedagogical responses to radical social, cultural, and technological transformations. They note that as digital media and communication shape, organize, and disseminate “information, ideas, and values”, there is an urgency to the development of critical media literacy. Such a project is one of empowerment that connects the educational engagement with media messages to participation in democratic society. (Kellner and Share, 2007)[7] Their conceptualization of critical media literacy expansively embraces information, technical, multimodal, and broadly conceived print literacies. In current and emerging analyses of the competencies that students must acquire in resonant educational approaches toward the advancement of democratic society, media literacy is one in a constellation of linked or interdependent literacies—digital literacy, civic and ethical literacy, and data and information literacy.

Irrefutably, literacies are the critical underpinnings in the achievement and sustenance of democratic norms and values. The importance of literacies appears self-evident. But any literacy needs to be activated and its test is one of consequentiality. By consequentiality I mean that the literacies we regard as the cornerstones of democratic society are actionable in the real world. Digital, information-laden culture is a good example and one that captures the dimensions of and connectedness between digital, civic, ethical, data, and information literacies.

Educators have long bemoaned their students’ lack of informed discriminatory perspectives in the business of curating online sites in the domains of both academic research and popular culture; specifically, separating the spurious from the authoritative. Further, the long-established notion of the “information rich/attention poor” nature of digital engagement among youthful demographics has a persistent relevance. Over 50 years ago, in his analysis of the “attention economy”, Herbert Simon argued that “In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes”. (Simon, 1971)[8]. And of course, information consumes the “attention of its recipients”. This “superabundance” of information, as Nicholson argues, has a corresponding “scarcity” or “poverty” of time and attention—speed prevails over depth. (Nicholson, 2009)[9]. The attention economy is one in which tech companies compete for our attention globally, and this economy is powerfully driven by social media which steers “two billion people’s thoughts 24/7” at an average of 147 minutes of social media time every day.(Center for Humane Technology, 2021)[10] This “harvesting of human attention”, as Tim Wu terms it, is the chief enterprise that turns the human capital of attention into prodigious profit.(Wu, 2016)[11]

Literacy is activism at its core. While education scholarship is of course, a universe of critical and methodological foci, concerns, and research trajectories, literacy and democratization are foundational constituents upon which all educational approaches must proceed. These established and emergent literacies are key to the democratization of our technologies and platforms and to countering the debasement of public discourse and the degradation of digital spheres.

3. Neutrality

Paulo Freire was most emphatic on the issue of neutrality in education; specifically, there is “no such thing as a neutral education process.” (Freire, 1970)[12]. For Freire, education functions either as an instrument of conformity or an instrument of freedom; and as an instrument of freedom, education builds and reinforces the capacity of individuals to act with creative agency, to instigate social transformation, to achieve and sustain social justice. Democratic educational theory and practice, especially critical pedagogy, challenges neutrality in education because neutrality itself is a purposeful position, a bias, a political stance. “Neutral” education is as Giroux argues, a “version of education in which nobody is accountable.” (França, 2022)[13]; that is, education—all education—is necessarily inscribed with power and politics, preferred narratives, foreshortened or selective histories, dominant ideologies, and more.

Most concerning is a version of neutrality that is an avoidance of acknowledgement and discussion around pressing and highly contested issues—the deleteriousness of disinformation and propaganda, climate change and environmental degradation, racism, poverty, war, misogyny, xenophobic, homophobia, social justice, and much more. Neutrality can erase histories of minorities. In the Canadian context for example, a position of neutrality erased the history of colonization, systemic racism, and oppression of Indigenous people and necessarily privileged the dominant narratives of a European-descended, non-Indigenous majority. Because the progress of democratic society is at stake in our educational practices, our pedagogical approaches need to eschew neutrality and address accountability in the social and political problems of the day.

Within the educational institution itself, the contextual determinants of education, the factors that drive, structure, and direct educational policies, priorities, and practices are largely political matters which have a profound impact on the widest range of outcomes from curricular design and content to delivery models to pedagogical latitude to budgetary affordances and criteria, and much more. As Alyssa Hadley Dunn has argued, “Everything in education—from textbooks to the curriculum to the policies that govern teachers’ work and students’ learning—is political and ideologically informed.” (Walker, 2018)[14]

4. Praxis

The practices toward democratic education are numerous and necessarily vary from one societal and educational context to another. However, there are principles and practices that have relevance and application across diverse educational and societal environments:

The Unbounded Classroom

The concept of the classroom as a more than a physical space is key in the achievement of democratic approaches to education. The unbounded classroom is in the final analysis, a means by which knowledge in the abstract becomes knowledge in action. Pedagogies in the unbounded classroom necessarily understand and address learning in the public sphere beyond formal learning in institutional spaces. The unbounded classroom recognizes the critical and educational value of affective and experience-based learning.

Experiential Learning

Dewey proposed “un-scholastic” pedagogies; that is, experiential learning or learning through “empirical situations” outside of the structures, constraints, and imperatives of formal institutional education. Over a century of ongoing interpretation, application, and development, experiential learning remains a current and future-facing educational philosophy and practice that situates pedagogies and learning in a dialogue between formal and applied learning.

Public Issues and Participatory

There is no more powerful educational promise and outcome than learning that speaks to real world public issues and that assures students that their studies have consequence in the public sphere—indeed, a hallmark of democratic education. The key notion here is participatory learning in which students recognize their responsibilities and capacities to transform their learning into positive and sustained social change.

The Moral and Civic Project of Education

Freire's influential concept of critical pedagogy advanced educational philosophies and practices that stressed self-reflection, creativity, participation, and agency. Such philosophies and principles articulate and guide students to engage with the public sphere, to formulate and assert ethicality in their studies, both theoretical and applied, and to help students imagine and ultimately realize their educational experience as contributory to and consequential in democratic norms and values.

5. Conclusion

Agency is the progeny of democratic education. For those somewhat uncomfortable or in disagreement with the claim that education is political, one can respond that breathing is political, in literal and figurative terms. As Flor Avelino has forcefully demonstrated in her analytical reflections on sustainability and social justice, and struggles for breathing—COVID, air pollution and climate change, black men murdered by police (Eric Garner, Javier Ambler, Manuel Ellis, George Floyd, and others, all of whom uttered the words, "I can't breathe" while being constrained by police) and the responses of Black Lives Matter protests around the globe, and more—taking a stand on the right to breathe is political at its core. (Flor, 2022)[15] As this paper began with the idea of "thinking dangerously", of education as a powerful antidote to authoritarianism, of democratic teaching and learning as setting the moral compass of society, so it concludes with the idea that democratic education is the breath of social change. Further, as informed educated citizens are the foundation of democracy, educators are on the front line of developing, sustaining, and instigating the democratic public sphere and democratic society itself.

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