

A Philosophy of Education

--David Deubelbeiss



Dear Colleagues,

I begin this statement of my educational philosophy with a personal salutation because it encompasses what I believe first and foremost about the learning/teaching experience: that knowledge is personal. All knowledge is filtered through the experience of the individual as Dewey would insist, but further it is my belief that all knowledge is part of consciousness and it is for the teacher to compel students to “engage” the world and thus “know”. Knowledge is not indifferent nor abstract in the Aristotelian sense. It is filled with the heart and awareness of each individual and like Kant, I believe that “no knowledge exists outside the human subject”. In my teaching I’ve always started from this fundament point – the sanctity and individuality of each learner and each learning experience. Truly, I think and feel and teach the ideas of liberalism and the enlightenment as they pertain to the primacy of the individual.

Further, I believe that since we all “experience” reality – we are all both learners and teachers. Each human being has a teacher inside themselves and it is only the outward structure and form and labels in each society (schools, coach, counselor, mother, cop, president) that cause the separation and conflict. Even a baby teaches the mother and so it is within us all, this capacity to share what we “know” and to encounter the world.

All teachers are students, all students are teachers. Of course there are some personalities more suited to teaching. I was always one of them; excited by ideas, wanting to share and tell stories, curious, devouring, patient. Yet, I’ve found throughout the years that we all can be great teachers. It is not black and white but “personal” and we all can find “the way”. Each of us can be a teacher if we only take the time to know ourselves.

As the above infers, I take a progressive approach in the classroom – the student comes first. As the old adage goes, “I don’t teach subjects, I teach students”. Broudy elucidates this salient point well when he says, “we can see that when an educator has as his or her ultimate motive any consideration other than the pupil’s potentialities, he or she is no longer an educator.” I would reject outright any essentialist philosophy on the basis that it doesn’t reflect the actual reality and situation of the learner and too narrowly carves up a world which isn’t categorized but rather fluid.

Yet, my teaching philosophy while having at its core the learner’s freedom and integrity – is also a patchwork of pragmatism and utopianism. I believe teaching is a calling.

Teaching is not only a sanctioned job and a time slot but also a way of being and seeing the world. It is a way of life. The true role of a teacher is therefore to make the student aware of their own self, their own capacity and capability as a teacher. A teacher is as much a motivational psychologist as a carrier of knowledge. There is a revolutionary aspect to teaching, in that the teacher in the ideal, tries to transform society from that of passivity into action. The teacher tries to help students realize their potential and in doing, make society into one of ongoing learning. A school without walls.

I have started from a very utopian standpoint and most necessarily so. As Shelley so famously quipped, “A man’s grasp must exceed his reach or what’s a heaven for?” Still, there are many concepts that inform this most complete and complex notion of “teacher”. There are many questions I’ve tried to wring the truth from..... Let me describe them and slowly fill out the picture of who I am as a teacher.....

1. What is knowledge? Why is it important? How do I know, I know?

These basic epistemological questions in my opinion must be answered in faith. Faith of each in his own way. Every man is created equal but also different thus there isn’t one belief that says there are ultimate truths and another that believes we are making it up as we go along..... It is rather a gradient that exists between the two and a man may lay along any point and may be at any point at any time.....it is a dynamic thing and also a

“universal” thing. I would reject both extremes of the continuum – Idealists on one end who evoke the ultimate and absolute and the critical theorists and post modernists who would not “ground” knowledge at all. At base, all knowledge is a question of faith – “credo ut intelligam”, a believing so we may know. No man can evade this.

I start at the basic Socratic notion of “know thyself”. All knowledge is first that of self and last, that of self. Meaning, all learning is really only the realization of who you are in relation to the world. A student learns math. He or she may know numbers, figures, skills but until the point that the knowledge jumps from memory to self-remembering (to borrow a term from Gurdjieff), there is little learning or knowing. It is only “parroting” and the human content is missing. Empirical knowledge does exist but it exists only within the framework and functioning of a human being.

The greatest feature in my mind, for a teacher or a student is that of being “reflective” and engaging themselves in critical conversation. It is that small voice of dissent, of questioning, of filtering, of inquiry that we seek to turn on and which brings to light, knowledge. All else is just a “shadow of knowing”. If we know that the best teachers are those who are reflective practitioners (Schon), we can also say that the best students are those who have conversations with themselves and begin the true process of knowledge building which is the ripening of experience in the heart.

In my years teaching, I have seen how children “talk” to themselves as they engage in learning and are “in flow”. There is something so natural and essential about the learning

process that it makes me wonder if we shouldn't really be "unteaching" rather than teaching. Learning is continual and effortless – if you watch children this is proved over and over again. In a very profound way, we have to destroy the myth that learning is difficult and arduous, a myth that society drills into each of us. I firmly believe in this concept of "delearning" and however naturalistic and romantic it may sound -- I believe it as truth. You can teach anyone, anything – so long as they haven't been ground under by the mill and myth of learning as a Sisyphean endeavor.

I guess this is where the "hidden curriculum" that the critical theorists talk about, creeps into the picture. This hidden curriculum stymies and wrongly packages learning into a very "unnatural" context. Children are then taught that learning is "boxed" and "schooled" and we give birth to a group of disengaged and passive adolescents.

Richard Brautigan wrote about his in his fine poem [The Memoirs of Jesse James](#)

*I remember all those thousands of hours
that I spent in grade school watching the clock,
waiting for recess or lunch or to go home.
Waiting: for anything but school.
My teachers could easily have ridden with Jesse James
for all the time they stole from me.*

Seferis, a Greek poet, borrowing from his country's great tradition declared that all knowledge is "knowing how to call things by their right name." I would agree.

Knowledge is something that comes in and of communication. "No man is an island" and knowledge is only an extension of the man into the world. A means of being, a means of encountering and experiencing the world. Self knowledge both precedes and is part of the dialogue we have with the world and our experiences of it. So knowledge is both

getting outside the cave and both returning to tell others. (to use Plato's allegory). We have the imperative to return and communicate and share – again, I say, we are all teachers.

When it comes to knowledge, we may never ever walk in the same river twice as Heraclites extols, yet still we know and share what is that river and the water therein. There is some “a priori” knowledge that we all share and partake thereof. Gyorgy Faludy, an amazing teacher and scholar recounted a story about his days in “the lager” or concentration camp in Hungary. He watched those around him die. Many would despair and throw themselves against the electric fence or ask to be shot. But that small group who would gather at night and discuss / learn. That small group of men he taught in that hell – somehow survived. Knowledge for them was “bread” and sustenance. It was a vital substance and as Faludy says, “proves that knowledge in and of itself is the nourishment that gives us life.” Ignorance and not trying or wanting to know is in some ways, death.

Knowledge changes with time and is also blanketed, dusted with an eternal element. Truth, love, beauty, evil, courage, sadness are all things we “know” as humans. They change and don't change, they remain in that measure that Octavio Paz echoed in his statement, “Wisdom lies neither in fixity nor in change, but in the dialectic between the two.” What I have to teach my students is to move and punch but still remain in one place..... A teacher must direct students to that which is timeless but use models/examples that are relevant and new.

2. Education: Why learn anything? Purpose?

Education I believe, has two functions. It should be both a means of creating a benevolent society and by extension, a means of letting the individual (student / learner) explore their potentiality within that overhanging framework (cultural constraints).

All students possess their own potential and it is for the teacher to draw that out of the student and into the air of actuality / reality. This is the true function of formative education and why a teacher is in some archetypical (and secular) sense, next to god -- guiding with godly hands. Yet, this is done within the “freedom” of society. A man is one who lives among others and education has in measure, a socializing function. Here, I espouse a very secular but humanistic view of education. That education is for “the progressive realization of our own ignorance” and then, only then, can we rebuild anew.

We learn a language to belong. We learn a song, to belong. We learn numbers to communicate and “belong” . All education has this “belonging” and the function of cultural transmission. Yet within that, education has at its core the individual and that individual’s own critical “knowing” of the world. Education must foster a balance between the needs of the individual and the society -- it is at this balance point where “true” freedom resides. Still, the social contract emanates out of the individual’s will and is not imposed.

I really have difficulty as an educator, participating in the “circus act” that is nationalism. Its songs, salutes, sayings. Its flags, festivals and foaming at the mouth, There is no validity in nationalism, in any form, capital N or small n. Especially given the fact that we have weapons of violence that can be so easily used in the name of “the nation state”. I believe it is very much incumbent on an educator to bring to their teaching the principles of secularism, ecumenicalism and pacifism. Teachers do have a moral role to play to protect our youth from the violent and odious ideologies of supremacy that still parade today and go by the name of the nation state. I reject any notion that an educator should be “impartial” or even objective. A teacher is first and foremost a human being and in that capacity should “enlighten” through their own beliefs and actions. I would go along with the critical theorist’s notion that no educator is ever indifferent or objective.

Freedom is really the key to all teaching. It unlocks both the student’s power within culture and the power of themselves as beings of potentiality. The teacher has an obligation to foster a critical and discriminating mindset within students through a questioning attitude. It can’t be just the positive side of freedom (as Isaac Berlin marvelously describes in his essay, *The Fox and the Hedgehog*) of potential but also a critical awareness of the constraints (negative freedom). Only when the student becomes aware of the always constraining chains – will they truly have the strength to cut them and take up the call of liberty that Voltaire envisioned with his “Ecrasez l’infame” , “Destroy the infamy”. Education means achieving within students both an awareness of their responsibilities as citizens (Dewey) and further their responsibility as citizens to be critical actors in society’s own continued development and reform (Freire).

3. Schools – what are they for? Who needs them?

As a teacher with many years experience in schools, however contradictory this may seem – I both reject the notion and necessity of “school” as is presently packaged AND continue to work within and through these same schools I condemn.

How can that be? Well it is enveloped in the idea of teaching one student at a time and the notion that a teacher never teaches “students” but rather “a student” and we are guardians of each person, sensitive to their uniqueness and individuality. It is a practical accommodation with the system as it be. Revolutions only breed destruction and the true change comes “quiet on the wings of a dove” (Nietzsche). However much I reject schools as “agents of socialization” (see Gatto – or more precisely his quip that a student needs school as much as a fish needs a bicycle) I recognize their reality and seek reform within.

Yet, schools I reject for several reasons. First and foremost because of the notion that learning and education should not be divorced from the society as a whole. Mark Twain said with good effect, “don’t let your schooling get in the way of your education.”

Schools and classrooms should not become divorced from reality and society / life as it is. They are not test tubes even, they are life itself and school should be as much focused

on the “pragmatics” of life, as any theory and incubation. We should educate our young, not school them (like fish wanting bicycles).

Also, schools are reflections of society and not as we often suppose, creators of it.

Society today changes rapidly, it is not static. Schools no longer reflect the social facts and as such, are terribly outdated and dysfunctional. This cannot be overstated.

Further, schools should be focused not on the teacher, not on inculcation and not on dependency but on originality, on thinking and being a free, self determining citizen.

Then end of schools should be the beginning of “real” education and schools should be seen as merely a stopgap and temporary historical necessity. Schools should be intellectual agencies primarily and the majority of learners can learn through a different framework. There is NO real necessity of having schools other than our own lack of imagination as a society. (and schools continue to be, primarily for this reason – they validate so much of what we do. Yet, is this reason enough or is the argument for schools circular – we are all “schooled” so our children must be schooled and their children and so on?).

The future will bring much change to education. I am at the forefront of this process and through my own websites (please see EFL Classroom 2.0) and seminars, bringing the gospel of “open use” and “open learning” to a world used to walls and rows of desks.

Technology is not everything but I can say with certainty and my liberal beliefs that whatever else education is, it is “access”. Meaning, the educational level of a society is

reflective of the degree of effective access each member has to the facts and tools within that society. Presently, technology offers not just the hope but the reality of every person becoming responsible for their own learning and teaching / educating freely. Web 2.0 collaborative technologies offer every citizen the possibility of a first rate education through shared learning and access to content. There are issues of ownership/copyright, there are issues of access and literacy but these ARE ONLY ISSUES. They are small hurdles and technology bringing access to content, will I hope, point the way to networked, self – learners and a school – less society. The kind of “learning society” envisioned by Donald Schon, decades ago.

Ivan Illych questions the role of school and I echo his passion and sentiments. He asks us to get rid of the authoritarian mindset and “teaching by numbers” mentality of the 20th century and jump into the next. Here we are but are we “De-schooling”? No. As a teacher I truly ponder why not, given the social force of the internet to unleash and democratize learning and access to content.....everyone truly could be a teacher. We wouldn’t have to look within 4 walls to “learn” but rather could look out into the big, wide world. We have to stop educating our children for the past!

“The object of teaching a child is to enable the child to get along without the teacher. We need to educate our children for their future, not our past.” – Arthur C. Clarke

A book that has constantly never ceased to inform and amaze me is “Teaching as a Subversive Activity”. In this book is not only the call for the educator to be a force of social change vis a vis education but also the call to change schools. The authors say;

“The institution we call ‘school’ is what it is because we made it that way. If it is irrelevant, as Marshall McLuhan says; if it shields children from reality, as Norbert Wiener says; if it educates for obsolescence, as John Gardner says; if it does not develop intelligence, as Jerome Bruner says; if it is based on fear, as John Holt says; if it avoids the promotion of significant learnings, as Carl Rogers says; if it induces alienation, as Paul Goodman says; if it punishes creativity & independence, as Edgar Friedenberg says; if, in short, it is not doing what needs to be done, it can be changed; it must be changed.”

Schools need to be changed despite the conservatism of society and how entrenched the institution is. The focus should be less on divorcing students from the “home” and more on educating the parents, on the primacy of their role as teachers (Cowhey). The failure of schools is not a failure of students but a failure of society -- you can’t just throw children away, as we do today.

4. The curriculum – what should it be composed of?

This is very easy to answer (and the easiest of things are the hardest to “explain”) -- LIFE. The curriculum should be devoid of authority in its purest sense. It should be determined by the learner’s own desire and “need” to know. To each his own. Dewey was so right to focus on the role of “process” and discovery. Educator needs to lean more and more in this direction as the world changes quickly underfoot.

In essence, education should always be about discovery and curiosity. Cultivating this spirit of inquiry, whatever the subject, within the student, is the calling of all educators. It

is not to inculcate a skill or to act as an authority on a subject or to represent a way to a “job”. Lighting the flame of the “will to learn” , is the only real gasoline the destination (curriculum) needs. The Socratic method, the sandbox theory of education should be the means by which educators attack the problem of student motivation (unfortunately, so many aren’t skilled enough and so fall back on the more “memory based” notions of what teaching and knowledge is). Schools should be about unleashing this power within and cultivating students who deeply want to know and learn.

There is a deep drive and need to know. We have to keep this alive and not cut it up/off as we presently do in most youth through a very trite and shallow culture of hypocrisy that on the one hand values education but on the other shows no sign of valuing it outside of school. (like Plato, we too have cast out the poets from our own Republic).

There are basic skills students need to learn but we should also be aware as educators that the skill is not just something that exists in isolation. It is the HOW that is much more important than the WHAT – latent structure rules obvious, declared Heraclitus. True education is in the grace and way and not the thing/object itself. You can know all the facts in the world but if you can’t implement them towards some change in the world (praxis), it is all for naught. The curriculum of any nation, any people, should recognize both facts and firmament.

5. Teachers and Students

In the ideal sense, there should be no line between the two and it should be about mutual dialogue and empowerment (Rousseau). I believe we should also acknowledge the very

salient fact espoused by Carl Rogers in his wonderful book, “On Becoming a Person” that one cannot “teach” another. One can only provide a model and picture of what that might be like. We all truly teach ourselves. My own readings of such a seminal thinker as Michael Polanyi and his groundbreaking book, “Personal Knowledge” further inform my stance.

Still, there will always be “leaders” and always those with authority who show the way. How they interact with students should be in the vein of caring, empathy and authenticity.

When I say caring, I say it in the sense that whatever learning happens usually happens from the thought that there is purpose and commitment behind the teacher’s effort. The teacher is purely a motivator and the primary means of motivation is through their own emotive effect. Every student realizes the ultimate reasons that a teacher is there. Money, family, cruelty, joy, sports.....so many reasons. Yet, if a student doesn’t know in their heart and soul that a teacher is there because they care – there is very little learning that can occur (Noddings).

The role of the teacher is to show they care and is much the same role as any effective presenter – controlled emotion. Why do we need a person – we can just read books? Well, we need that emotional and “human” content to inject learning, the real juice of knowing.

The teacher should properly not be labeled “teacher” but psychologist. They should know what will effect their students, they need know how to prime their knowledge pump. Teachers are not inculcators but cheerleaders and coaches. This is why so many teachers

fail – not because they don't know their subject or know WHAT to teach – they don't know HOW to teach. They don't understand the manner or method of human emotion and dialogue / communication.

Years ago I read Neill's "Summerhill". Its message still rings loud and clear and I hope one day to try my own hand at my own experimental school. I especially love Neill's own thought that the end of education is happiness and to be measured by the happiness of the student. He states, "I'd rather graduate one happy street sweeper than a thousand neurotic prime ministers."

Eric Fromm in his phenomenal forward to the book, lists the following principles for student and teacher interaction. Principles which I see as my own guide light.

1. **A belief in the basic goodness of the child.**
2. **Setting the happiness of the child as the goal of his education.**
3. **Responding to the emotional needs of the child, not just his intellectual ones.**
4. **Taking into account what the child wants, not just what others want for him.**
5. **Limiting discipline to a minimum.**
6. **Allowing freedom, not license, and respecting the rights of others.**
7. **Making sure teachers are honest and sincere toward their pupils.**
8. **Cutting the child's ties to his parents. Making the school his home.**
9. **Avoiding giving the child guilt feelings.**
10. **Not teaching religion.**

Very practical but very true guidelines to how a teacher should interact with students.

But beyond caring (and I don't mean this in the tradition "happy go lucky sense" – even "hard" teachers can exude caring) there is the need for student freedom to express and have power to decide the curriculum. I feel strongly that much of the failure of present education is that students don't feel any control over curriculum and it is for this reason they "turn off". Once again, there is the need to reflect and create an environment which

lessens the teacher's authoritarian role and gives learners more power and thus, the end goal, motivation.

At bottom, teaching is about motivating the students to take control and responsibility for their own learning and development. This is the ennobling / enabling feature of education and its highest end. A feature I've finally become comfortable to be part of. You can't teach you can only lead.....

Kahil Gibran says so lucidly in "The Prophet",

"And he who is versed in the science of numbers can tell of the regions of weight and measure, but he cannot conduct you thither. For the vision of one man lends not its wings to another man."

In sum, my philosophy of education rests on the sanctity and humility of life. That like Socrates, we should "let no day pass without thinking of the good" and know at the end there is only ignorance. All wisdom shuns hubris and walks towards humanity and common brotherhood.

At bottom, teaching is about making a difference, however you define that. At bottom, a teaching philosophy is about forever knocking marble off the statue and searching for the form within. At bottom, a teaching philosophy is like Paul Valery's view of art – "never finished, merely abandoned."

Yours,

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