

Two Visions of Education

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I

The means and ends of education are shaped by multiple visions of educational virtue. For some, the primary vision of education is to enable students to acquire the competencies specified by an array of explicit objectives. Like the management of an assembly line, predictability, control, order, specificity are prized and pursued. The school administrator's main task is to insure that students achieve intended outcomes. In this vision, schooling is taken "seriously". By seriously I mean that the student's life within the school is analogized to the world of work. Schooling is the child's work and the teacher's job is to supervise its development so that it is performed well. This vision is a production vision. Current federal reform policies in education veer towards the production vision of education.

Another vision of education, the romantic vision, is guided by other lights. In this second vision schooling is regarded as an occasion for discovery and, perhaps most of all, for helping the student learn how to secure experience that is meaningful. The ability to make school experience meaningful is more than the achievement of what is pursued. Meaning is about grasping relationships—making connections. When this happens the meaningfulness of the work is increased, as it is in a human relationship. This vision, as I said, is a romantic vision.

The romantic vision gives higher priority to what is imaginative than to what is actual. It places more emphasis on what is literary than what is literal. It places greater value on what is metaphorical than on what is measurable. It has a greater interest in what is distinctive than on what is standard. It puts a higher premium on exploration than on discovery, and regards the quality of the journey as more educationally significant than the speed at which the destination is reached. It is fed by our deeper instincts.

These two visions of education, the productive and the romantic, are not necessarily publicly articulated; they are lived, shaped, and “absorbed” by the context in which one finds oneself.¹ We often pursue aims and engage in practices that have become a deep part of our sub-consciousness without ever making them conscious. After all, our initial experiences with the forms and goals of schooling are secured quite early in life. Indeed, it has been said that professional socialization to the job of teaching takes place when children are four or five years of age. It is exposure to teachers and what they do, the curriculum and how it is formed, the school and how it is organized, the practice of evaluation and how it is done that influence the way we think about schools and our proper role in them. At the same time, there are differences in how meaning is made and it is the implications of these differences, their features and their consequences that I wish to address.

¹ Bruner, 1990. *Acts of Meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Today we live in a culture that is quite anxious about its schools. We are reminded almost daily that we live in a global economy and that unless we can compete, our culture is doomed to become second or even third rate. The road to success culturally, as well as economically, we are told is through education and we know we are doing well in education when our test scores exceed the test scores of our international competitors. We scrutinize the daily paper to find out how well our students are doing and revel over small differences in escalated performance, differences that would be difficult to observe in the daily marketplace of life.

The irony of wanting more as evidenced through test performance is that it often gives us less when it comes to education in the romantic form that I have described earlier. To the extent to which we are interested in deepening meaning and in providing occasions for the excitement and satisfaction that schools can engender, ironically we look at test scores when we should be looking at the degree of engagement students display in

the classrooms and schools they inhabit. We might be better off understanding what teachers need in order to relate to students in ways that will make the pursuit of intrinsic intellectual satisfactions a primary aim of the educational enterprise.

Now it should be said that raising test scores as an educational aim is not necessarily an ill-considered aspiration. Few people vote for lower scores. My point, however, is that paradoxically an increase in test scores can represent a decrease in the quality of education students receive. What the meaning of a test score is depends not only on the score, but on the context in which it was secured. Were significant opportunity costs paid for higher test scores and was the cost worth the gain? If the time devoted to attention to, say, reading scores require inattention to other fields of learning, it may be that such inattention may be too high a price to pay, even for higher reading scores.

But the deeper question does not reside in test scores alone, the deeper question pertains to the kind of life experience we want our children to have. What kind of childhood do we want them to have? What kinds of meaning do we want them to be able to make for themselves? What kind of long term consequences are we seeking? After all, test scores are proxies. Nobody is seriously interested in the single correct answers taken individually from a test. Test scores are intended to serve as indicators of forms of experience and types of achievement which are deeper and broader and more significant than a blackened space on a machine scored answer sheet. Put in statistical or research design terms, test scores become significant when they have predictive or concurrent validity, that is, when they correlate significantly with other more significant aspects of a child's life.

The educational significance of test scores, to my way of thinking, is in direct proportion to their ability to predict what

students will do when they can do what they themselves want to do.

The astute educator will recognize that the aspiration I am trying to describe is more difficult, more complex, and more subtle, than filling in the response options with a number two graphite pencil. Filling in the blanks is, and has been, since its initial use in the 1920s an efficient and “clean” way to assign scores to individual children. It is a way to achieve objective knowledge of what a child knows, or so it seems. This belief is itself, problematic.

The objectivity of so-called objective tests does not reside in the objectivity of the test items selected but in the methods through which responses to those items are scored. Scoring objective tests make no provision for the exercise of judgment.² The task is to determine whether or not a certain alternative on a sheet to be

² Judgments are possible when choice is an option. Objectively scored tests provide no option for judgment with respect to correctness.

scored was, in fact, selected. That “decision” can be made by machine and is typically scored by an optical scanner. I mention the features and consequences of testing because it is one of the significant drivers of the curriculum. When combined with the general ethos in schools of order and predictability, a culture of schooling is created that can take the heart out of intellectual life, a life that depends on curiosity, speculation, initiative and surprise. When fealty to rule dominates, what one has is a culture of conformity. What schools ought to be are institutions that celebrate the life of the mind. They should be intellectual institutions, not only academic ones.

The image I have just described is rooted in the great romantic tradition. Romanticism, a 19th century phenomena, was less interested in order and more interested in spirit.³ The romantics regarded each individual a unique spirit, someone who possessed a special gift that under proper circumstances could

³ For a discussion of the Romantic movement in Western civilization, see Stephen Toulmin, *Return to Reason*. 2001. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

come to realization. Many teachers, particularly primary school teachers, hold the same view, although they have not necessarily been reared on the works of Blake and Emerson. The romantic view – and there are several – is largely about potentialities and their realization. It is a view less concerned with predictability and control than with discovery and surprise. It is more concerned with imagination than with fact, places a greater emphasis on the possible than the actual. It is, writ large, a liberating orientation to life.

By contrast the formalism of the Enlightenment was designed to discover the rules and regularities of nature; to classify and organize was what the encyclopedists were up to.⁴ Our schools, in an effort to bring them up to speed, so to speak, have been moved towards the formal and orderly conception of practice. This manifests itself not only in the expectations held for teachers and students, it manifests itself in the very language that is used to

⁴ The work of the encyclopedists is discussed in Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*. 1992. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

describe educational practice; consider the following:
accountability, deadlines, target populations, standards, and
measured outcomes instructional objectives. We seek a tidy
educational universe.

The logic of this orderly approach to school practice seems irrefutable; if you don't know where you're going, you won't know whether you have gotten there. Everything depends on clarity and specificity and when the technology of educational practice is competent, the program will operate as close to an errorless one as can be expected in so soft a field as education. In fact, there are schools in which the curricular expectations for teachers and students are designated on a day by day, hour by hour basis. Every teacher in the school is to where know the class will be on, say, Wednesday at 10 am on April 21st so that no child will be left behind. Risk entails not in pursuing surprise, but failing to meet the specifications laid down by curriculum planners and reinforced by school administrators and others responsible for the

performance level of the student. For any given class of students, curriculum expectations are virtually homogeneous.

One of the most influential factors shaping a production vision of education pertains to the use of grade levels and promotion practices with respect to them. Virtually all schools function within a graded system⁵, a system invented in Quincy, Massachusetts in 1850.⁶ The rationale is clear. Schools are divided into grades, and grades are defined by the age of the student. Thus, the first grade is for students who are six years old. The eighth grade is for students who are thirteen years old. Success in school means largely completing the work assigned for each grade and then making a decision pertaining to promotion with respect to the successful completion of the content for each grade. Thus, in an ideal pedagogical system, a school that approached errorlessness in its efforts to promote learning, all students in any grade level would be moving at about the same

⁵ David Tyack. 1974. *The One Best System*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. For a discussion of graded schooling.

⁶ For the implications of graded education, see John Goodlad and Robert Anderson, *The Nongraded School*. 1987. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World.

pace and would complete the work for that grade at the end of the school year. Thus, what we have in a graded system is the expectation that students will be more or less alike and that promotion from one grade to the next requires mastery of the content for that grade. If such mastery or competence is not secured, a retention policy is implemented; the student repeats the grade.

The effectiveness and efficiency of a school is one with very few retentions.⁷ The premise is that teaching will be effective and students will be industrious and all students at each grade level will be successful in passing the exam that is normally given at the end of the school year. Uniformity in the process of teaching and learning is the aspiration of school planners. It is all quite tidy.

However, if one reflects for a moment on the aptitudes of students, it becomes clear that students do not all come into the world with identical aptitudes or temperament. Students differ.

And the older they get, the more they differ. Thus, a student who

⁷ The efficiency movement is described in vivid detail in Raymond Callahan, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*. 1962. Chicago, Illinois: Univ of Chicago Press.

had very high aptitudes in mathematics would be expected to perform significantly higher in mathematics than a student whose aptitudes were, let's say, in one of the language arts, but not in mathematics. Thus, two students of the same age with different aptitudes would be expected to go at different rates. In this scenario, variability of performance is the expectation, not homogeneity. In fact, the longer the student is in school, the greater the distance a high aptitude student in mathematics will be from his fellow students whose aptitudes in mathematics may not be as great. What one has over time is an increase in variance in the performance of any population of students with the variance becoming greater each year. One also hopes for an increase in the mean for the group as a whole.

All of this, of course, is predicated on the assumption that teaching is ideally suited to the aptitudes of each youngster. The point is that when teaching is suited to the aptitudes of each youngster, differentiation among aptitudes will yield

differentiation in performance. Diversity, rather than homogeneity, should be expected.

There are, of course, ramifications of a social nature that derive from this conception of school performance. On the one hand, there would be no such category as “failure”. In an ideal pedagogical system, each student would go at his own rate. Treating all students in identical fashion is the most unequal practice one can embrace. And it should be said, that the student whose aptitudes resided in mathematics might not do as well as his classmate whose aptitudes were in language arts. Differentiation is a part of the major picture that is painted with respect to how students perform.

What the good school should seek is the realization of two aims: differentiation and integration. We want to be able to promote and help realize the particular interests and aptitudes of individual students and at the same time we want to create a culture in which those aptitudes are integrated into a coherent and respected whole.

This conception of practice has implications for economic considerations; however, I will not go into these issues at the moment. The basic point, without being distracted, is that we have invented a form of school organization that is relatively “easy” to manage, but we have not created a system which is educationally equitable, particularly when some areas of performance are privileged and others marginalized. The student whose aptitudes are in the arts is, compared to his peer in mathematics, is diminished with respect to the significance of his or her performance. Put simply, mathematics counts more than music or visual art.

II

Speaking of music and the arts leads us to the exploration of an artistic paradigm as desiderata for school improvement. It is ironic that a field – the arts – which is given such little priority in the school curriculum should, I argue, provide among the most educationally important criteria for making schools better places for students and teachers. What do I mean by desiderata? I mean

aspirations, features, qualities, and characteristics of what schools ought to be about. Let me give you some examples of what I mean. Let us examine the lessons for education from the arts. What can schools learn about educational practice, about the quality of experience students undergo, about the features that are valued in a learning environment we call a classroom or school? These issues will keep us occupied.

III

First, what the arts have to teach us is to look for interacting relationships among the qualities that constitute any work of art whatsoever. Whether it is music, poetry, literature, dance, the visual arts, the theater, the arts are about interacting relationships, the way qualities are related to one another. For example, the problem that the composer has is to make a selection or, I should say, an invention, of those sonorous relationships so that the music is satisfying. But to be able to do so requires one to step aside and to reflect upon the qualities of sound that one has created, to see the way they influence each other, and to make a judgment about

the rightness of fit that they display. Work in the arts is about relationships and so is work in the sciences, work in the language arts, work in athletics and the rest. The challenge is to know how to pay attention to those relationships. The art teacher, for example, who puts up a student's work on a wall and then invites the student to discuss the interacting qualities that the work displays is doing precisely the kind of teaching that ought to be done in other fields as well.

Not every aspect of every field will lend itself to such an analysis, but many will and all too often, too many don't. They are simply neglected aspects of the teaching of the arts. They should not be. Put another way, arts education, when writ large, is about learning to see and learning to feel. Seeing is in the service of feeling and it is feeling, ultimately, that one pursues in the arts. Learning to slow down perception so one can really see is as important in biology or in literature as it is in the visual arts. It is no small lesson.

A second important lesson that the arts can teach the general education community is the importance of pursuing multiple solutions to a problem. There is so much in our schools which is fettered to the single correct answer, that the idea that there are multiple perspectives possible, that there are many ways to solve a problem, that there are often many solutions to any problem is by no means a trivial realization. Single correct answers provide great efficiency for purposes of scoring, but have little to do with deep forms of educational experience.

I can never forget the experience my wife and I had with an architect who designed our home some thirty years ago on the Stanford University campus. We were talking about kitchens and the various functions that a kitchen, at least a good kitchen, needed to serve. The architect came to our next meeting with a dozen drawings of possible kitchens given the space that we had available. He knew, like any good designer, that there isn't just one good solution. Schools can design curricula so that students come to recognize that there isn't simply one answer to every

question, or one solution to every problem. Developing a tolerance for multiple possibilities, so to speak, is not a bad thing when most of the problems we confront in the world are problems in which there are multiple answers or, even more demanding, no answers at all.

A third lesson for education from the arts relates to the locus of evaluation. By the locus of evaluation I mean the place from which the appraisal is made. For most of what is done in school, the solution or answer to a question can be “looked up”. Students learn to prove the arithmetic answers that they are asked to address. The location for evaluation is located outside rather than inside the psyche of the individual. It is a socially defined convention

Clearly there has to be tasks and procedures in which utter uniformity is exactly what one wants, spelling, for example. But when that model of correctness so permeates the curriculum, it teaches the tacit lesson that for every question there is a correct

answer, and for every problem there is a correct solution, and if the student doesn't know it, the teacher does, and if the teacher doesn't know it, the text book does. By contrast, what one can also arrange are tasks in which there is an internal locus of evaluation, a source that encourages students to seek their own answers, to follow their own bliss, to make judgments on the basis of what feels right under appropriate circumstances. This practice could be accused of a rampant form of subjectivism, but I would argue that there needs to be room for subjectivism in our schools as well as for the more readily accessed objectivism.

The Romantic spirit about which I spoke earlier cannot be constrained by a solid diet of external rules. One wants to encourage children to explore, to judge, to hold opinions that are individual, to speculate about possibilities. Ironically, we talk about losing the global race and yet the sorts of cognitive processes I have just been describing are absolutely central to our being able to hold our place as a culture among cultures. Those who refuse to speculate are traitors to the future. Speculation and judgment are a

part of what the educational process entails – or at least ought to entail.

A fourth lesson for education from the arts relates to the importance of allowing oneself to be guided by the work rather than guiding the work always with conscious intention. In a certain sense, artists have learned to surrender to the array of emerging cues that the process of art making engenders. One learns to rely on taste, on judgment, on the ability to yield to the directions the work is suggesting. In Dewey's terms, one becomes flexibly purposive.

It seems peculiar in a way to talk about the processes of art making as having animistic qualities, but they do. Form takes on a vitality when it is “right”, and artists are sensitive to the rightness of that vitality when it appears. One important American artist comments that when he starts to paint, “I try to lose control”. What a peculiar thing to say! Yet, the loss of control is in some sense the beginning of freedom; it provides the possibility of discovering new arrangements that could not have been articulated

by a conscious rule-governed mind. Losing control means opening up oneself to possibility, to taking risks, to pushing yourself to the edge of incompetence. Fear of failure leads to conformity to what is already accepted. This is not what this gentleman was talking about.

What practices might be created in schools that might cultivate an attitude of intellectual risk-taking, a willingness to pursue surprise as an aspect of one's work? To the extent to which we want schools to become not only academic institutions of great efficacy, but intellectual institutions that put a premium on the ideas and sensibilities that mind can explore, activities that will promote intellectual life need to be invented. But even more, the culture of the school needs to be designed in a way so that work of that kind, work that puts a premium on surprise and discovery, has the possibility of emerging. The more schools look like assembly lines, the less likely imagination will be regarded as a relevant resource. The last thing wanted on an assembly line is autonomous innovation.

A fifth lesson that education might learn from the arts pertains to the fact that there is always a material mediating the thoughts and feelings of an individual working in an artistic context. To say that one works with a material is not to say that the material automatically becomes a medium.⁸ It will achieve the status of a medium when it mediates, that is, when the material one works with actually carries forth what an alert mind working at the edge of possibility has to offer.

The character of a medium imposes both constraints and provides affordances for anyone who works with it. One has to work within those constraints and possibilities. Thus, if an individual student is working with the logical construction of language, then logic and clarity and specificity are probably going to have a major role to play in guiding the action carried forward. If the material is poetry other criteria prevail. Put more simply, the

⁸ Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception*. 1974. Berkeley: University of California Press.

materials students work with achieve the status of a medium when students acquire the technical competencies necessary to transform the material into something that mediates the ideas, visions, and feelings that the individual student wishes to express. And so it is that technique is an inherent part of any effective effort to represent any aspect of the world or one's experience of it. The refinement of technique, therefore, is a necessary condition for good work with any medium whatsoever. Aesthetic criteria are directly relevant for guiding judgment. After all science at its best is an art. Artless science isn't very pretty.

A sixth lesson that can be learned by education from the arts pertains to the importance of paying attention to nuance. How, for example, do the cadences of language, its tempo and metaphorical loadings, for example, make a difference with respect to the kind of meaning readers of that form are likely to secure. Nuance lives in the details and can make or break the work that one has underway. Consider writing, for example. In typical approaches

to the teaching of punctuation, rules are provided to enable students to determine whether a comma is required or a semicolon, for example. However, another basis for making judgments about which punctuation mark to use has to do with aesthetic experience. What kind of stop feels right at this point in the sentence? What kind of tempo works? What does a colon do that a semicolon does not do, and can it be transformed from one to the other in order to escalate meaning? What I am saying is that what is right with respect to punctuation depends not only on rules on but on feel, a feel for the language and for the kind of punctuation device that will move meaning forward in the direction the writer wishes.

Punctuation is both a formal and a substantive consideration. It connotes as well as denotes and learning how to take advantage of the way language can be shaped and emphasized with respect to the punctuation mark one selects is a critical resource used by artful writers. Concrete poetry is a prime example. Calling attention to visual features and their interaction with text is an important way to help students understand how language works in

its written form. Form informs and good writers use form to do just that; to inform through form.⁹

Finally, one of the most important lessons the arts can teach education is to help students understand that the examination of a form or an image pertains not only to the form an image displays, but to the world it represents and at times transforms. Having looked at paintings by any of the French impressionists, one can never see the world in quite the same way. Through their art, we come to discover qualities of the environment that we had not noticed before. Shadows we once saw as gray or black now seem purple once having seen paintings by Monet. The point here is that works of art not only provide consummatory satisfactions, they provide instrumental utilities in recasting the way in which we address the world. The same is true in science. The theories that

⁹ For a discussion of the connection between form and meaning, see John Ciardi. 1975. *How Does a Poem Mean?* Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

have been generated by scientists, what Kuhn calls paradigms,¹⁰ are structures for securing a fresh understanding of the way the world looks, functions, and operates.

It is important to recognize that such achievements do not just happen. Teachers can have a major role to play in helping students build connections between the work and the world. The last things we need are more facts detached from function. We need ideas that recast the way we experience the world. By becoming conscious of that transformation experience becomes meaningful. This is no small achievement. On the contrary; it is among the most important achievements of intellectual life.

IV.

Let me conclude by asking you what themes you take away from my remarks? I hope they are these. Education, both its means and its ends, is guided in practice by two visions of what is important. One of these visions, the production vision, is rooted in the search for order that characterized the aims of the

¹⁰ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 1996. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Enlightenment and was most acutely expressed during the industrial revolution.

The other vision with its search for the unique spirit of man was rooted in the romanticism of the later part of the 19th century. American schools and schools in industrialized nations have emphasized the formalist vision, especially when schools are believed to be failing. I argue that the construction view of education imposes significant limits on our conception of education's possibilities and suggest that that it is art and artistically grounded practice which offers the most promising long term conception for achieving our most ambitious aspirations. As a result of engaging in artistically grounded practice both teachers and students are more likely to attain a surprising outcome; in the process they become artists. No higher achievement is possible in any field than to be regarded as an artist at what you do. Thus artistry, broadly conceived, should reside not at the margins of education but at its core. With your help I believe, one day, it can.