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Reenvisioning Education and Democracy
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Democratizing Curriculum for the 21st Century

“The control of the knowledge preserving and producing sectors of society is a critical factor in enhancing the ideological dominance of one group of people over another.” – Antonio Gramsci, Italian Political Scientist

There is something wrong with Modern America. Many Americans think that they know what ails this country, but even more can only recognize that the system in place is not working. Our society is supposed to be held together by the mutually respected idea and goal of democracy. To further this goal, the only logical tool is our educational system. John Dewey, a highly influential educator, believed that education is concerned with the making of the world; allowing students to have control over their future. Thus, it prepares its citizens for a democratic society – to participate. This preparation has at its center highly contested and disputed curriculum and curricular reform.

By coming to an understanding of what democracy is, hopefully we will be better able to understand how to ideals apply to curriculum and better schools. After years of intellectual analysis, democracy has become akin to ice cream and comes in just about every flavor under the rainbow. Increasingly, it seems that democracy has come to reflect whatever agenda it is needed to support. To try to counter this nebulous definition, I have developed a three pillars that attempt to both clarify my understanding and suggest a positive direction. These ideas aren't exclusive of other, but present critical ideas more explicitly related to curriculum.

First I believe it is fundamental that, irrelevant of any definable social norm, all citizen's opinions are equally valid. This validity, though, does not ensure that all citizens are well-informed and thus prepared to act carefully and analytically. They, therefore, must *actively and persistently seek knowledge*. This inquiry can take the form of literally asking about policy or news, but more frequently is a more holistic process of query towards deeper knowledge through media, conversations, and observation. In one sense, democracy can be the composite of innumerable views, inevitably ever-changing, thus requiring constant inquiry.

In considering everyone's views and ideas it is important to remember that the popularity of an idea shouldn't imply that other's views shouldn't be represented. In one sense, this is a nod to our founding fathers, particularly Madison, and their concern in *Federalist #10* in which they warned of the tyranny of the majority.¹ He believed that it was possible that a majority faction could deprive the minority of their rights undemocratically when it would be beneficial to the majority. Today, while this is obviously still possible, it is much more common for the minority to find that their opinions are simply not included or viewed as valid. *Minority viewpoints* are essential for any creation of community or democracy, but also equally important, their inclusion empowers the groups in society that need agency the most.²

Finally, once citizens are informed of other's equally valid view points, *decisions in a democratic society must be a social process and community oriented*. Choices about people's lives must consider everyone's opinion and then together all stake-holder groups

¹ "The Federalist No. 10: The Utility of a Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection (continued)", *Daily Advertiser*, Nov. 22 1787 (Probably James Madison) from <http://www.constitution.org/fed/federal10.htm>

² Agency is "the capacity for human beings to make choices and to impose those choices on the world on a collective basis" from Wikipedia

need to have extended conversation to reach decisions. For this process to be effective though, citizens need to actually interact and communicate with each other. This becomes difficult on a larger scale, but important decisions need to be made in the neighborhood, thus validating the system.

These pillars present my idea of democracy and hopefully education's relevance is obvious. These ideas should ideally seem logical and provide mandatory requirements. In reality, public school curriculum is far from democratic. Curriculum is essentially legitimated knowledge set by a specific social group and/or class, in specific institutions, at specific historical moments. There are different ideologies as to the purpose of curriculum within education. The first argues that curriculum should work towards purely academic achievement. This ideology suggests that knowledge is neutral and that ideas aren't chosen for an intrinsic value, but rather for their inherent value as simply knowledge. An alternative ideology suggests that curriculum builds towards socialization. As students work their way through the educational system, they will learn norms and definitions of social interactions and thus build towards a decided social consensus.

The problem with both of these ideologies is that they fail to consider political and economic contexts. Even knowledge learned in a humanistic pursuit is not free of bias from a plethora of potential influences including gendered and elitist forces. "Knowledge...never exists in an empiricist, objective relationship...and the circulation of knowledge is part of the social distribution of power."³ Curriculum working towards

³ John Fiske in Michael Apple, Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age (Routledge Press, New York 1993) 45

socialization rarely address the important issues lying at the heart of the traits that are being taught to students.

It is the failure to consider these issues and forces that have led to a significant weakening of our democracy. Curriculum is not chosen through any sort of process that could be even remotely called democratic. Instead, curriculum choice is decided by those in power, whether it is social, economic, or political. This sort of power was written extensively about by Steven Lukes⁴ and best expressed by John Gaventa as “A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B’s interests.”⁵ In English, Gaventa is essentially stating that this type of power allows the dominant social forces (A) to control the masses against their best interests and also to through “influencing, shaping, or determining [their] very wants.”

This sort of power has repeatedly been wielded and has created an educational system that places value in the artificial concept of official knowledge. Official knowledge in the United States has been a stalwart of public thinking for quite awhile, though it has become even more prevalent lately. According to Michael Apple, there are two main forces pushing curriculum in increasingly undemocratic ways. The first force is composed mostly of the New Right pushing for an education that is rooted in classical Western culture and widely ignores multiculturalism and alternative views points. The other dominant force in undemocratizing of curriculum is the ever-present influence of

⁴ Luke referred to this definition of power as third dimensional. See Steven Lukes, Power: A Radical View (Macmillan, London, 1974)

⁵ John Gaventa, Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley (University of Illinois Press, Urbana 1980)

Corporate America and its particular breed of capitalism with concerns only extending to the availability of new workers.⁶

The conservative backlash spearheaded by the New Right is in no way surprising. As parents are told that their children's schools are failing, they look back at their most recent frame of reference for solutions. Frequently, this era was at least twenty years ago and parents are easily lured into nostalgic thinking. All too quickly though, this nostalgia becomes a shift in ideology towards traditionalism and a cry for moral or Christian values.⁷ Parents then begin to "shift the blame for the supposed breakdown of 'traditional' values and standards in the family...*from* the economic, cultural, and social policies and effects of the dominant groups *to* the school and other public agencies."⁸ This sort of traditional thought became particularly popular during the 1980's, when E.D. Hirsh worked actively with William Bennett, Ronald Reagan's Secretary of Education, towards developing the idea of Cultural Literacy. Cultural Literacy argues that all citizens need a basic common knowledge of information to function properly. This idea is not inherently bad, but frequently the development of this core knowledge excludes minorities and multiculturalism. This educational essentialism also in the process seems to state that the knowledge that was excluded is not valid or worth considering.⁹

At a most basic level, this New Right coalition is attempting to go back to a previous time in American history where the majority of the students in public schools were white. Many see the decay of our country as the fault of not its leaders, but of immigration and the growth of minority communities nationwide. While

⁶ Apple 3-14

⁷ Michael Apple, Cultural Politics & Education (Teachers College Press, New York 1996) 6-14

⁸ Apple 28

⁹ David Purpel and Svi Shaprio, Reconstructing the Public Discourse on Education (Bergins & Garvey, 1995)

neoconservatives may wish this to be true and there to be some sort of panacea, they fail to consider that this goes entirely against our democratic principles. Democracy must always include a deep connection to the values of pluralism and diversity. Our democracy is should be inclusive of all citizens irrelevant of social constructed categories, like race, gender, sexuality, or religion.

Unfortunately, this is not the only force pushing our public schools away from having democratic curriculum. As mentioned before, Corporate America and its unique breed of capitalism are attempting to subvert democracy and instead create an economic definition of democracy that judges human relationships on their marketability. These values are not the values talked about by Neoconservatives, but rather competitiveness, efficiency, consumption, and maximization.¹⁰ Problems with curriculum moving in this direction should immediately be obvious – these are not values we want our children learning! Students should not be learning about competitiveness, but rather should be focusing on skills that allow them to build consensus and to include as many of their classmates as possible. In attempting to foster democracy and develop skills for deep democracy in the class room, it is integral that students are able to interact with other members of society. As another example, curriculum is increasingly focusing on what corporations view to be high-value knowledge – discrete knowledge. In the system, workers won't need skills like active listening or critical thinking, but rather will be to be able regurgitate information and facts.

In a truly democratic society, corporations and capitalism should have no influence over political decisions of the country. Apple argues, though, that when society acts in the interest of these corporations, it is actually working towards authoritarian

¹⁰ Apple 71

populism, a far cry from democracy. Authoritarian populism is the close relationship between government and the capitalist economy, a radical decline in the institutions and power of political democracy, and attempts at curtailing “liberties” that have gained in the past.¹¹

The picture painted above is of an increasingly grim world in which curriculum will be dominated by forces working against the best interests of democratic citizenship. At this point I’ve defined and explained democracy and curriculum, but have avoided putting a specific label on democratic curriculum. It is created by a community in communication with equal access and power and because of this process, the curriculum has the power to empower students to become involved in their democracy. Thus, it has two distinct benefits, insuring that curriculum is inclusive, responding to community needs, and works towards the creation of participatory citizens. Unfortunately, in many situations, truly democratic curriculum is more of ideal to be labored toward rather than simply a new system to adopt.

While draconian trends can be found almost anywhere in the United States, so can programs and schools truly teaching their students a democratic curriculum that facilitates an active citizenry. I’d like to now present an extended example of the possibilities of democratic curriculum, but it should be recognized that this only one example among many widely different possibilities.

The Algebra Project, headquartered in Cambridge MA, is a math-science program that makes the transition to algebra accessible to 7th and 8th graders. It’s mission is to facilitate “achievement for African American and other minority students who have not been reached by existing efforts at education reform through materials development,

¹¹ Apple, Official Knowledge 20-43

teacher training, peer education, and school-community partnerships.”¹² The program was founded in 1982 by Bob Moses, a former organizer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He began by offering the program to a few 7th graders with the goal of allowing them to pursue honors mathematics in high school and thus have a greater chance of being able to attend and excel in college. The program began to spread, but it quickly became obvious that the students in the program were of a higher socioeconomic class.¹³ This entirely defeated the programs goal of empowering students democratically to further the democratic process. After community input, the program was expanded to almost all 7th and 8th graders in 1985.¹⁴ Since then, the program expanded to 6th graders and after a grant from the National Science Foundation, developed an entire curriculum for high school algebra and geometry. The program is undoubtedly a success and has since been expanded to reach 10,000 students and “92 percent of graduates went on to upper-level mathematics courses in ninth grade, twice the rate of students not in the project.”¹⁵

The curriculum also dramatically succeeds in helping to create democratic citizens. There is a clear emphasis on the concept of mutual success without competition despite diversity. The development of this ethos is crucial to later developing a cohesive and compassionate citizenry. It is achieved through students democratically setting their own goals. The Algebra Program also effectively includes parents, allowing them to

¹² “Mission” from The Algebra Project, 2005, <http://thealgebraproject.org/mission>

¹³ Robert Moses, Mieke Kamii, et. al “The Algebra Project: Organizing in the Spirit of Ella” from learning as a political act edited by Jose A. Segarra and Ricardo Dobles (Harvard Educational Review, Cambridge 1999) pp. 99-118

¹⁴ A few 8th graders were apparently not ready to be parented into the program and were held back. After this first year, all class thus forth were in the program.

¹⁵ Ronald Roach, “From Mississippi to Miami: Florida International University recruits legendary civil rights activist Bob Moses and his nationally recognized math literacy project,” *Black Issues in Higher Education*” 10/21/04.

make the final decisions associated with what their children were taught. The parents were also presented with opportunities for creating community and facilitating life-long learning through adult education. Finally, according to Bob Moses, the point of the program “is to get these young people involved strategically in school reform. It's part of what I describe as building the demand side as young people get active to put pressure on the system for better education.”¹⁶

The Algebra Project represents a powerful example of democratic curriculum in action. Yet programs like this are still quite scarce on the barren landscape of public education. Clearly active concerned citizens need to come out and *demand* that their schools offer a democratically enlightened curriculum. Everyone has to speak out loudly against the power enemies of democracy before it is too late. In addition, I would like to try to offer a few formational actions that can be taken by everyone to greatly increase the democratic potential of classroom curriculum.

Get to know your neighbors! This short statement belies the important message that it suggests. It is very difficult, if not impossible, for a teacher or a school administration to introduce a democratic curriculum single-handedly. They instead need the help of their communities to articulate their concerns and desires in their children's education. This voicing of community desires though hinges on the cohesiveness of our citizenry

Share the knowledge! I've only scratched the surface of the potentials of democratic curriculum and possible implementations. These solutions are now drastically needed nation-wide to help combat the New Right and Corporate America. As cities everywhere deal with the same issues, it is extremely important that successful

¹⁶ Bob Moses in Roach “From Mississippi to Miami...”

models of democratic curriculum are widely disseminated. The ideas also need to be further developed and supported to maximize their potential to improve as many students as possible.

Think Critically! The forces working against a democratic curriculum obviously do not explicitly say this nor would they ever see themselves as undemocratic. To be able to recognize the power dynamics of society requires that a substantial curriculum with real examples; it's also crucial. It needs to be come widely understood that in the words of Paulo Freire "If the advice of the experts worked in the past, why then are you here now? If you are here now because you were not satisfied with the results of the other way of working, why didn't we pick this way? Why not walk another road?"¹⁷

It is important to note though that democratizing curriculum is in no way a magic potion for solving social ills and/or creating a thriving democracy. In grappling with these issues, I have numerous concerns of what I see as problematic ideas in suggesting change in curriculum towards a more democratic model.

First, I'm concerned that if we shift curriculum in what might seem to be a more multicultural direction, for example, that official knowledge won't be changed, but just substituted in as new official knowledge. This new set of knowledge could easily become part of the institution, not changing with the needs of the community.

I also grappled with the concern that perhaps the use of curriculum isn't the best way to go about democratically educating our youth. Given my ideals of democracy, it would seem that deliberation or conversation would be much more effective tools in preparing socially aware citizens. The use of curriculum frequently also means the

¹⁷ Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change (Philadelphia, Temple University Press 1990) 172

separation of the teachers from the students as a the dominant figure, impairing the democratic potentials in class.

Finally, wondered whether this type of change is truly possible on a wide scale. By modifying curriculum to become more democratic, my efforts have mostly been working within the system to affect public education. Some argue that working within the system reinforces the system and co-opts you, yet I can't think of an acceptable way to balance this concern with the grave importance of public education as a democratizing and empowering entity.

The country is rapidly approaching a crossroads where we as a nation will need to decide whether we want a democratic curriculum that will allow us to move forward into the 21st century or whether we want to regress to a blatantly class-based education system benefiting only a few. Below are the words of Lao Tzu, the father of Taoism. His words are over 2500 years old, yet his words still ring true and everyone needs to become a leader, as he suggest, in their community.

*“Go to the people.
Learn from them.
Live with them. Love them.
Start with what they know.
Build with what they have.
But the best of leaders when the job is done, when the task is accomplished, the people
will all say “We have done it ourselves”.”
– Lao Tzu, 604 B.C.E.*

Annotated Bibliography

Apple, Michael W. Ideology and Curriculum. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 1979.

Apple's work was something of a cornerstone for my research. His first book focuses broadly on hegemony in schools covering its relation to economics, curricular history, and labeling. The book is a good introduction to Apple's variety of critical theory, but it is quite dense.

Apple, Michael W. Cultural Politics & Education. New York: Teachers College Press, 1996.

In this book Apple takes his same critical gaze and looks at different institutions. Of most interest and relevance is his discussion of conservative movements and education. He also discusses national curriculum and educational reform. Obviously similar to his first work, but is substantially less theoretical and hegemonic discourses now have real "labels."

Segarra, Jose A., and Ricardo Dobles, eds. learning as a political act. Cambridge: Harvard Educational Review, 1999.

A collection of essays that are broadly divided between struggles for learning and learning from struggle. The former section includes the essay on The Algebra Project I drew from and also includes interesting narratives about bilingual education and community-building in Gaza. The book then has a series of visioning essays about the potential future for higher education and education worldwide, cognizant of the book's title.

Freire, Paulo. Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Trans. Myra B. Ramos. New York: Continuum Co., 1968.

Paulo Freire's seminal work was written in the late 1960's after his experience with indigenous Brazilians attempting to teach literacy. He came to the conclusion that their lack of involvement and access was due to economic, social, and political domination by oppressors to maintain a culture of silence. Freire argues that through proper democratic education, students can develop an awareness of self that allows them to affect change and no longer be passive.

Horton, Myles, and Paulo Freire. We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change. Ed. Brenda Bell, John Gaventa, and John Peters. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990.

Paulo Freire and Myles Horton, founder of the Highlander School, discuss social change in an extremely democratic manner by "talking a book," over a few sessions allowing an amazing flow of information. The book is quite accessible and flows

wonderfully between Horton and Freire's obviously different styles. They cover very broad categories including ideas and education.

Smith, M. K. (1996, 2000) 'Curriculum theory and practice' the encyclopedia of informal education, www.infed.org/biblio/b-curric.htm. Last updated: 30 January 2005

The encyclopedia of informal education is a powerful internet resource with well written articles on a variety of topics and a generally progressive slant. This article particularly interesting and focuses on curriculum theory in depth. It explains curriculum as a product, a process, and as praxis.

Barber, Benjamin R. *A Passion for Democracy: American Essays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.

Barber's work is a wonderful text that truly makes the case for democracy. Given the many social ills that democracy has brought, some call for another system. Barber argues democracy is still powerful and relevant, with a particularly poignant section on education for democracy. Barber discusses cultural conservatism and the civic duty of citizenship.