Bredo's Lessons for Media Literacy

Robert Karaba
New Mexico Highlands University

Ezra Klein's 2020 book *Why We're Polarized* assumes the United States is polarized and attempts to explain that fact.[1] Jon Meacham released a biography of Abraham Lincoln in 2023.[2] Why yet another biography of President Lincoln? Meacham's thesis is that we, as a nation, are as polarized now as to the degree prior to the Civil War. According to a New York Times/Siena College poll conducted in October of 2022, 71% of Americans believe American democracy is under threat.[3] The United States is not so united. Our democracy appears unstable.

On the education front, Kathleen Knight Abowitz argues that public schools face "a legitimacy crises" stemming from a "discourse of derision."[4] There are "so many negative viewpoints on public schooling … that now represents the common sense opinion of public schooling."[5]

Eric Bredo's "A Critique of Categorical Thinking" details the misuse of certain forms of categorical thinking which aids in explaining "why we're polarized."[6] We can also use his critique to analyze media reports that contribute to the discourse of derision that leads to the legitimacy crises in public schools. He suggests the media packages categories to construct narratives that incite conflict, rather than lead through it. In other words, he illuminates the media's irresponsible use of fallacious categorical thinking used to polarize, because that is what sells. In this response, I will retrace his description and critique of how stereotyping and binary thinking are used to sow division, as well as the institutionalization and rigidity of categories themselves. I will also briefly explain how this potent triad can help us interpret one aspect of the discourse of derision that leads to the legitimacy problem of public schooling.

Bredo starts by defining categorical thinking as way to "classify objects, ideas or people" into "homogenous, non-overlapping and fixed conceptual 'boxes.'"[7] According to social psychology, we make these broad generalizations in order to simplify and help make sense of our complex world. Bredo then

relates the social processes of attribution and allocation to two fallacious forms of categorical thinking: stereotyping and binary thinking. Attributing particular qualities to objects, ideas, or people creates a category. Attribution is necessary. Yet, when we attribute erroneous qualities to objects, ideas, or people within a particular category we commit the fallacy of hasty generalization. Allocation is when we sort objects ideas or people into "non-overlapping" categories. If this is a wrench, then it is *not* a screwdriver. Allocation is also necessary and useful but becomes problematic when there is "unwarranted polarization," and we commit the fallacy of false dichotomy. Although some categories are binary, not all objects, ideas, and people can be separated into distinct and different categories, as Bredo mentions being both Canadian and American. Attribution and allocation are not wrong, it is that "unwarranted homogenization" and "unwarranted polarization" are.

The joint fallacies of stereotyping and false dichotomy are a powerful combination that result in polarization. Homogenizing one group by neglecting differences within a category and ignoring the commonalities between categories sows division. For example, promoting the similarity within the class of Republicans/the Right and sensationalizing the differences between Republicans/the Right, and Democrats/the Left, the media contributes to our political polarization. Furthermore, Bredo suggests that the media intentionally uses these two fallacious forms of categorical thinking because controversy is what sells. Hence, Bredo's irritation.

Bredo's explanation of these fallacious forms of categorical thinking can also be used to analyze the discourse of derision which erodes the legitimacy for public schools, as well as the specific categories used to evaluate schools. Via standardized tests, the binary categories of "proficient" and "non-proficient" are created. Depending on how the collective body of students within a school performs on these tests, then, the school may be further categorized as "failing," or with a grade system of A, B, C, D, or F. If a school is categorized as failing, the media tends to commit hasty generalizations by attributing the quality that that school has poor teachers and staff. Although some schools that are categorized as D or F and may have the quality of bad teachers, not all

do. In the south valley of Albuquerque, New Mexico for example, a few years ago South Valley Academy (SVA) was designated as a D school on the state report card, and thus reported the SVA as a poor school. The principal had to counteract media reports by defending the teachers and staff by pointing to the degree of poverty and language barriers of their student population. Despite their scores being low, SVA's big goal was to graduate students even if it took longer than four years. This example points to one of many instances of the media neglecting differences within the category of "failing schools," thus contributing to the discourse of derision that poor teaching is to blame for bad academic performance. This is coupled with the binary thinking that "schools" are distinct from, and do not overlap with, "society." By ignoring societal influences on schools' collective academic performance, the media sets up a false dichotomy and allocates the blame to one category—the schools. We all know that we cannot divorce schools from the societies in which they are embedded. Yet it is the public schools and teachers that get categorized as failing, not our society.

The third issue with categorical thinking Bredo raises is with the social process of "institutionalization": the creation of and the fixity of categories. Although the focus of Bredo's article concerns the rigidness of the categories, what intrigues me is which categories we create for those represent values. He proposes that categories that are fixed do not adjust with changing circumstances and are the result of the "quest for certainty." Labeling his paper a "critique" is a form of thinking with categories or sorting his ideas. But what makes it a critique? Does a critique always imply criticism, or can there be positive critique? Does the concept of "critique" evolve and change with the circumstances, or is its meaning etched in stone for all time? Is his choice solely between praise and critique? Could he choose "illumination" or even "rumination" for example?

Yet, the categories we create in the first place seems to take precedent since they represent certain values. As an educational example, the binary categories I just discussed of being "proficient" or "non-proficient" and letter grades for schools correspond to the value of accountability as derived from neoliberalism's exclusive focus on economic rationality to justify a school's

DOI: 10.47925/80.3.143

existence. In this instance, schools are held accountable to taxpayer dollars by proving a "return on investment" as measured by students' performance on standardized, academic tests.

If stereotyping, binary thinking, and institutionalization/rigidity contribute to division and the discourse of derision, then what is needed to strengthen communities and build legitimacy for the public space of public schools? Simply put, to combat polarization, it would be to highlight differences within a category, if they exist, and emphasize actual commonalities between categories. What are the thoughtful disagreements within the political parties? Can we expand the boundaries between Republicans and Democrats to the larger mutual category of humans who seek a good life on the same planet and Americans who inhabit the same country? Thomas Jefferson was respected because he was not arrogantly antagonistic against those opposed to the revolution, as he kept in mind the commonality with his adversaries.[8] "What if news editors sought ratings and profits by fostering depth and authentic, thoughtful disagreement rather than sensationalism and 'drive-by' shoot-from-the-hip debates?"[9]

Neoliberalism has won the day as the media touts categories proficiency and failing schools based on standardized test performance, along with the categorical thinking Bredo deplores. How do we defend against media stories that use academic performance as the sole measure of a school's success and hastily generalize those that do not measure up? How can we combat the false dichotomous narrative between failing schools and our inculpable society? Bredo also implores us to be open to other categories representing other worldviews and values. What categories would not just represent the neoliberal value of accountability, but would represent democratic values?[10] How might we institutionalize those values in evaluating schools? Can we be flexible with those categories?

The significance of Bredo's article is his warning that the media uses fallacious categorical thinking with fixed categories in ways that create polarization in order to sell themselves. Furthermore, in respects to education, the media overemphasizes one category that reflects the value of accountability as derived from neoliberalism. Vigilance is required in guarding against falling

into this thinking ourselves, in recognizing when categorical thinking is used to polarize us, and when thinking with categories represents values we do not agree with or excludes values that we support.

REFERENCES

1 Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized (*New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020).

2 Jon Meacham, *And There Was Light: Abraham Lincoln and the American Struggle* (New York: Random House, 2022).

3 Nick Corasanti, Michael Bender, Ruth Igielnik, and Kristin Bayrakdarian, "Voters See Democracy in Peril, but Saving It Isn't a Priority," *New York Times*, October 18, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/18/us/politics/midterm-election-voters-democracy-poll.html.

4 Kathleen Knight Abowitz, *Publics for Public Schools: Legitimacy, Democracy, and Leadership* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 20, 22.

5 Abowitz, *Publics for Public Schools*, 22.

6 Eric Bredo, "A Critique of Categorical Thinking," *Philosophy of Education* 82, no. 3 (same issue). https://doi.org/10.47925/80.3.127

7 Bredo, "A Critique," 2.

8 Mark Gerzon, *Leading Through Conflict: How Successful Leaders Transform Differences into Opportunities* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2006), 241.

9 Gerzon, *Leading Through Conflict*, 230.

10 See Michael Engel, *The Struggle for Control of Public Education: Market Ideology vs. Democratic Values* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).

DOI: 10.47925/80.3.143