

Philosophy and the Art of Teaching for Social Justice

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Given our current social, political, and educational climate, the need to teach in ways that help students develop the habits of democratic citizenship and inspire them to work for social justice is increasingly important. The barriers to democracy and justice are many. While we are at war in Iraq, at home we are implicitly called upon to uncritically support our government in a show of unity and patriotism.¹ At the same time, we push neoliberal economic policies that ensure the expansion of unfettered free market capitalism throughout the world, resulting in devastating human and environmental costs: growing poverty and desperation, inhumane working conditions, destruction of natural resources, privatization of public goods, disruption and dislocation of indigenous communities, and international policies and agreements that put profits before people. In terms of civil rights, the gaps between the wealthy and poor in this country are widening, and the life prospects for marginalized citizens — especially those who are not white — are often grim. While we recently celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to end legal segregation, we have de facto segregation in almost all spheres of public life. The large majority of non-white students currently attend poorly funded majority minority schools and those numbers are growing.² Yet, in the face of this suffering and social injustice, many of us remain largely oblivious or indifferent. In part, this stems from the luxury of being globally privileged as citizens of the most powerful nation in the world. But more importantly, perhaps, our ignorance is connected to the unfulfilled promises of democratic education. Instead of schooling that helps us develop social consciousness, compassion, commitment to others, and a sense of fairness, we worship competition, individual achievement, and educational standardization, believing ultimately in education as a means to economic productivity.

Arguably, one of the most important roles for education in the U.S., if not the most important, is to teach the habits, dispositions, attitudes, and behaviors necessary for democratic citizenship. These include openness, tolerance, respect, humility, cooperation, accountability, moral commitment, critical thinking, and concern for the common good, including the dignity and rights of minorities.³ Democracy and social justice are intimately interrelated. A democratic way of life is predicated on problem solving, and continually working to bring about more enriching, enabling, and just social conditions. To teach for social justice is to engage the very real struggles that exist in the world around us in classrooms and in the broader life of schools. It is to foreground issues of democracy above and beyond the more narrow educational goals of efficiency and increased tests scores that are often tied to high stakes accountability schemes. “Teaching for social justice,” writes Maxine Greene, “is teaching what we believe ought to be — not merely where moral frameworks are concerned, but in material arrangements for people in all spheres.” It is teaching that arouses “vivid, reflective, experiential responses that might move

students” to seriously engage questions of justice and to take ameliorative action in the world around them.⁴

While we have some exemplar schools set up to teach for social justice, they are few and far between. Moreover, in the educational climate that surrounds No Child Left Behind, we see less and less talk of the importance of educating for more than simply greater achievement on standardized tests. Given the mounting inequities in the world around us, it seems imperative that we as philosophers of education help reinvigorate the discussion of social justice issues in schooling, and in particular, provide some visions and tools for teaching and teacher education. In her recent Philosophy of Education Society presidential address, Barbara Houston calls for us to “adopt a forward looking perspective on taking responsibility” in the face of social problems. She writes, “we can acknowledge the problems and ask ourselves the question: what will I undertake?”⁵ Responding to this challenge, in this essay I offer several ways in which philosophers of education might take on the issue of educating for social justice and thereby contribute to more democratic educational and social visions. In so doing, I provide some ideas of what we might, as philosophers and educators, undertake, as well as what kinds of work still needs to be done.

There is a long tradition in philosophy of education of scholars who have prioritized addressing unjust social conditions in their work. I begin by describing some of the tools they have developed to help us to think critically about our world. In the second section, I contextualize these existing tools within the metaphor of a journey, suggesting that, although we may not know our ultimate destination, we need to act on injustices in the present so as to open up new and different possibilities for the future. Here I also respond to critiques that the kinds of critical thinking processes that we have so often called for may actually get in the way of our social justice efforts. In the last section of the essay, I argue that we also need to create new tools for addressing injustice, particularly within the context of teacher education.

THINKING PHILOSOPHICALLY

Critical educational theorists have compellingly demonstrated that we do not often encourage deep critical thinking in schools, but instead teach toward tests and reward recall of isolated facts. Lecture style pedagogies, arguably still the most predominant method of teaching in most school settings, tend to confuse teaching with transmission, and information with knowledge and understanding. Educational philosophers have long argued for the importance of developing critical thinking abilities in students as they are essential to democratic participation and decision making. They are also necessary for imagining alternative possibilities, as without critical reflection, students tend to think of the status quo (including persistent inequities) as natural and inevitable. In the face of social injustice, philosophers offer us valuable tools for thinking differently. Among the most important of these tools are disrupting taken for granted assumptions and unsettling common sense, asking better questions that help to clarify meanings and investigate implications, and offering alternative visions and possibilities.

Perhaps one of the hallmark tools of philosophy is to uncover that which we take for granted: the assumptions that go behind our actions that we rarely explore

because they are so deeply naturalized and obscured in the ways we see the world. For example, there are many practices that go relatively unquestioned because they seem simply to constitute the phenomenon of schooling: dividing students by age, fragmenting school days into distinct classes, grading competitively, and teaching only certain subjects. Schools have looked fairly similar for so long that we can easily forget the origin and rationale for current practices, and thus assume the way things are organized is either the only, or the best, way we can imagine. Patricia Hinchey maintains that, “we rarely see that our customs constitute one choice among many choices. Immersed in our own culture, we think in terms of doing things the one *right* way rather than in terms of doing things in one of many possible ways.”⁶ The consequence of not exploring our assumptions is that we then “create mental cages and inflexible rules” that seemingly control our actions.⁷ This is the case both in schooling and in how we look at the world around us. Among other things, failure to explore assumptions can result in paralysis, stagnation, and resignation, all of which are antithetical to forwarding ameliorative social change. Alternatively, a disposition to ask why we believe what we believe, and how we have become socialized to accept certain realities, can help us to ask better questions about our social condition, challenge givens and open up alternatives and possibilities.

About philosophical thinking, Dewey writes that it is “inquiry, investigation, turning over, probing or delving into, so as to find something new or to see what is already known in a different light. In short, it is *questioning*.”⁸ There is an art to teaching that begins in questioning, yet too often schooling is an affair of telling; “education is suffering from narration sickness,” as Freire claims.⁹ Freire’s problem-posing approach provides us with a useful model of the kind of educational questioning that opens possibilities, particularly toward the ends of greater social justice. He calls for learning that involves an existential exploration of the conditions of our lives, one that can both unveil how we often make choices that contribute to our own oppression, and reveal other choices that promote our freedom. In a problem-posing approach, “people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation.”¹⁰

Asking probing and revelatory questions is an important tool that philosophers can bring to the task of educating for social justice. Unfortunately, we don’t value questions or problems enough in schools, instead prioritizing the recalling of “right” answers. Nicholas Burbules writes that “learning how to ask a good question is in one sense *the* central educational task, yet one that is almost never taught explicitly, and rarely taught at all. The typical sorts of questions teachers ask are questions to which the teacher already knows the answer.”¹¹ In exploring questions, we open up possibilities for seeing the world differently. This is another tool philosophers of education offer to educating for social justice: more hopeful visions for schools and society. Greene often ties philosophy to imagination, believing that “it may be the recovery of imagination that lessens the social paralysis we see around us and restores a sense that something can be done in the name of what is decent and humane.”¹² One of the areas in which philosophers have offered vision is in

unpacking the meanings of democracy and justice, describing the educational implications of different conceptions of democracy, and calling for more inclusive and enriching forms of democracy. We see this especially in the work of Dewey, but also in the works of many of our members, for example more recently in Nel Noddings's call for critical thinking in times of war¹³; Ronald Glass's admonition for us to attend "to the contradictions between...espoused ethics and theories of justice" and current social practices¹⁴; and in John Covalleskie's argument for the importance of fostering the democratic virtues of altruism, diligence, and intelligence in schools.¹⁵

THE JOURNEY TOWARD SOCIAL JUSTICE

While philosophers of education have been calling for better critical thinking capacities by students and more imaginative democratic visions for education for a long time, these ideas have never been widely prevalent in schools. In part, this is because we are often not very good at speaking to broader audiences, preferring instead the more theoretically sophisticated argumentation that occurs among likeminded colleagues, often in discipline specific meetings. Moreover, though we philosophers of education may take the tools that I have been describing — uncovering assumptions, asking different questions, offering theories and visions — as given, and indeed rather mundane, it is important to address the fact that these tools, and indeed the conceptions of democracy and justice that drive many of our visions, can themselves become barriers to our social justice efforts. This is largely because our tools are always part of our present worldviews, which are inherently partial and limited. As we have seen in the large body of work done on the problem of whiteness in our diversity efforts, we can not rely on good liberal intentions (typically grounded in "rational" thinking) to lead our efforts to disrupt racism. Instead, those of us who are part of the dominant culture need to be much more self-reflective about our own assumptions, and in so doing, realize that there are some things we can not know, in large part because of our social positionalities. Only then can we learn to truly listen to, and collaborate with, marginalized others. Moreover, we need to trouble the call for abstract and decontextualized ways of questioning, reasoning, and behaving in the face of diversity. In making this point, Audrey Thompson challenges what she sees as the appeal by white liberals and progressives for universal moral principles, suggesting that the morality of the privileged "is one of the main obstacles to racial change. 'Universal' codes of ethics are the arrangements that make sense to people accustomed to privilege."¹⁶ She goes on to argue that the critical tools we have available to us now are "shaped to an important degree by the relations they are meant to disrupt" and thus we can not rely on them alone if we are going to realize new, more socially just, possibilities for living amid diversity.¹⁷

Thompson is not alone in critiquing the tools of the liberal philosophical tradition. Feminist, poststructuralist, and postcolonialist scholars are similarly concerned with how our current ways of thinking can impede rather than further social justice efforts. For example, Elizabeth Ellsworth challenges critical educators for being blind to the ways that they "are always implicated in the very structures they are trying to change."¹⁸ Similarly, Dan Butin critiques social justice educators

for assuming that their work for social and educational change is “somehow outside the potential for oppression.”¹⁹ He is concerned that social justice efforts are based too heavily on a “rational discourse of overcoming” and on the myth that social transformation is largely dependent on simply changing individual actions.²⁰ Troy Richardson and Sofia Villenas question the very ideas of democracy and human rights as the bases for moral decision making and action, suggesting they are too tied to Eurocentric assumptions and the imperatives of the dominant culture and ruling class.²¹

These are important critiques that we need to take seriously in our efforts to teach and work for social justice. Yet there is a danger that they can become disabling, as we can lose sight of any sort of anchor in working toward the reduction of unnecessary suffering and toward the abatement of racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism. We also risk miring ourselves in theoretical debates while the suffering around us grows. The problems of social injustice are too grave for inaction. It is essential that we address them in the here and now, even while we trouble potential solutions that we may arrive at, and even while we debate the dangers of offering visions (especially as they can become reified in meta-narratives). Here is where I think we can benefit from seeing work towards social justice in relation to the metaphor of a journey, one whose ultimate destination we can not know in advance. In writing about the disruption of social systems that overly privilege some groups of people (particularly those from the dominant culture), Allen Johnson claims that “it has to be enough to move away from social life organized around privilege and oppression and to move toward the certainty that alternatives are possible, even though we may not have a clear idea of what those are or ever experience them ourselves.”²² As part of the journey toward justice, we need to use the best tools that we have available to us now, including the tools of critical thinking that philosophers so value and the models we have developed of what a just society looks like, while also troubling those tools and remaining reflexive about the ways in which our social positionalities (and the blindnesses that are necessarily part of those positionalities) limit the potential effectiveness of these tools. This balancing act can then help us to shift our perspectives, actions, relationships, and investments so that we can then create new tools for thinking and acting differently.

In his philosophical analysis of *The Odyssey*, Burbules alludes to the importance of balancing what we think we know with the inherent uncertainty of all knowledge.²³ He also nicely displays the value of a journey metaphor — particularly one with unclear ends. He relates philosophical thinking and philosophical change to the kinds of experiences Odysseus undergoes in his decade long voyage back to his home in Ithaca, which is, of course, a different place when he does eventually arrive. Burbules credits Odysseus with the virtue of *metis*: the capacity to be strategic, crafty, adaptive, and resourceful — to get by amid challenges and roadblocks. We need a similar kind of ability to get by in order to work for justice in the absence of certainty. The challenges Odysseus faced parallel the roadblocks faced by philosophers engaging in social justice work. Burbules argues that “philosophy requires a certain kind of binocularism, I think: the possibility of

holding certain beliefs while at the same time seriously appreciating the perspectives from which those beliefs might be problematic.”²⁴ Similarly, educating for social justice requires using the critical thinking tools we have available, recognizing how they can be limited and even problematic, seeking out alternative ways of thinking about and using these tools, and perhaps most importantly, developing new tools and habits for engaging social injustice. Given how long we philosophers have been arguing for more critical habits of thinking it seems imperative that we do more than just try harder at what we have always been doing.

NEW POSSIBILITIES

To inspire students both to think critically and to assume the moral agency necessary to cultivate more humane and more democratic social and political relationships, we need to use and invent new forms of pedagogical engagement, which ideally can also serve as models for new forms of social engagement. These can only be developed as we experiment with different methods and with multiple ways of seeing and engaging the world around us in educational spaces. This is not to say that we do not also want to teach about already developed theories of justice; rather, to acknowledge that these rarely inspire our students to challenge their ways of seeing and acting in the world. There are a variety of alternative forms of pedagogical activity that open up possibilities for social justice education and that can help us to develop some new tools for social and educational transformation. Here I will outline two possibilities that can complement our efforts to get students to think more critically, focusing in particular on the topic of globalization (especially as it is manifest in the unfettered expansion of global capitalism, which many argue is the root of so much injustice). These are working with experiential accounts and narratives in classrooms and engaging students in performative activities.

Any of us who have worked with young kids know that stories often have much more evocative power than arguments, which can feel overly abstract and decontextual. Poems, parables, autobiographies, pictures, photographs, and videos are equally evocative representations. Greene lauds the arts for inspiring us to see the world in new ways: awakening reflectivity, defamiliarizing commonsense, provoking questions, and releasing imagination.²⁵ While many of us are aware of the power of personal accounts to evoke, they are often an underutilized resource in educating for social justice. When teaching about globalization, for example, I want students to think critically about a number of assumptions that are offered in mainstream discourse: capitalism is the one best system, success can be best measured through economic means, free trade equals fair trade, and competition is inherently good. I want them to ask different questions and imagine differently possibilities. They begin to do this well using the tools of critical thinking I described earlier, yet they are most moved, both personally and to think more critically, after stories and videos that expose the real impacts of globalization. For example, using ethnographic narratives, photographs, visual representations, and theoretical analyses, Deborah Barndt shows how the habits of first world consumers and the livelihoods of third world workers are fundamentally connected in the means of production.²⁶ She puts a human face on the realities of transnational capitalism by

describing the tomato production process, from Mexican fields to U.S. and Canadian tables. In detailing the stories of the female workers who plant, pick, package and sell tomatoes, often under grueling and inhumane conditions, we can't help but see the human, ecological, and spiritual costs of food systems controlled by market forces. The video *Life and Debt*, a powerful account of the deleterious impact of WTO and IMF policies in Jamaica, also introduces us to the real people who provide for our desires (picking our food and assembling our clothes) as they sacrifice their own. Videos such as *This is What Democracy Looks Like*, an independent media documentary of the WTO protests in Seattle, and *Affluenza*, a humorous yet telling portrayal of the consequences of U.S.-American over-consumption also help provoke different kinds of classroom engagement. Images and metaphors from these films and stories stay with my students as they try to make sense of globalization, to critically analyze arguments from a variety of perspectives, and to consider how they are compelled to act in the face of global injustice. At the same time, we also trouble the ways in which such viewing also can be an act of consumption of the "exotic" other, and may be colonizing as well as inspiring.

Another tool that can help students to think, feel, and act differently is performance. Performance studies scholars call for more embodied ways of knowing in classrooms, arguing against the Cartesian separation of the mind and body that is so prevalent in academic settings. They claim that our identities are constituted by a series of performances, what Judith Butler calls "a stylized repetition of acts."²⁷ When we become aware of how these everyday, often mundane acts create our social worlds, we can then have more control over these worlds, and learn to act differently, for instance, in more communal and environmentally sustaining ways. So, for example, driving to work, shopping at Walmart, eating at McDonalds, acquiring more than we need, and worshipping technology are all performative acts that help to shape and constitute the world we live in. Yet we are often not critically conscious of what these acts do for us, how they contribute to larger social dynamics, and/or how they connect us to others around the world. Using performance in the classroom can help us to see the problematic impacts of some of our choices. For example, Bill Bigelow asks his students to perform as leaders of developing countries in "The Transnational Capital Auction: A Game of Survival" where they are pitted against each other, bidding to get transnational corporations to locate in their country by creating a climate friendly to capital (low-wage jobs, few taxes or restrictions, weak environmental laws, and no unions). In playing the game, students are forced to confront the ethics behind globalization, breathing "life into the expressions 'downward leveling' and 'race to the bottom.'"²⁸ Alternatively, students can performatively practice organizing, creating alliances, and developing transnational coalitions — all essential for combating the negative effects of globalization.

Utilizing narratives, personal accounts, documentaries, and performances in the classroom, along with developing students' capacities to think critically, are tools that we currently have available to us in our efforts to teach for social justice. Philosophers of education can play an important role in these efforts by helping students use these tools, trouble these tools, and create new tools for engaging our

social worlds. Given our current climate of growing suffering, poverty, conflict, and desperation, philosophers of education can also help to reinvigorate discussions of the importance of education for democracy and social justice: education that cultivates students' capacities to respond imaginatively and amelioratively to the world. This is hard to do through familiar, and frequently uninspiring, forms of pedagogical engagement. While using alternative textual forms such as narratives and performances in the classroom is not necessarily new, they do have the potential to open up yet unimagined spaces out of which we can create new tools to use in our social justice efforts. Ultimately, they also may help inspire the passion and vision needed to construct a more hopeful, democratic, and just future.

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