

The Two Essays of Tapio Puolimatka: A Double-Barreled Response

D.C. Phillips
Stanford University

Unlike a relatively recent President of the United States who, unkindly, was said not to be able to chew gum and walk at the same time, Tapio Puolimatka has been able to write two essays at once. His achievement is even more remarkable given the fact that he probably did not recognize this is what he had done. Whether intended or not, the fruits of his labors are contained in "Constructivism, Knowledge and Manipulation." Both essays are of interest, but I shall argue that they need to be separated out and given independent elaboration. In his first essay Puolimatka delineates two opposing educational models, the "traditional" and the "progressive," and he makes some points about the logical relations between their internal constitutive parts. In the second, he argues that the progressive model harbors a substantial threat to the autonomy of the students. They are two separate essays, for they take our inquiries in two quite different directions, and it would be possible to give assent to the thesis of one of them (for example, the first) without accepting the thesis of the other. Let us examine each of them in turn.

THE FIRST ESSAY

In the first essay of the duo, Puolimatka says something which has not been said often enough, and which certainly has not been clearly heard by the hordes of individuals who these days are pleased to label themselves "constructivists." My criticism of the essay is, I believe, important but not serious, for it does not undermine the essential point that is made. In essence my main point is the same as that expressed in 1500 by Erasmus, when he wrote that "all definitions are dangerous."

This first essay can be summarized as follows:

1. The traditional model of teaching had a realist theory of knowledge, and a didactic view of teaching in which the student was seen as a passive receptor. The former, basically, was on the right track and the latter was deficient.
2. In contrast, the progressive model of teaching had a constructivist, non-realist view of knowledge, and a constructivist, action and interaction-oriented view of teaching. The former, basically, was deficient and the latter was on the right track.

The moral here, in short, is that in the move from the traditional to the progressive, one evil replaced another. But the essay has more to offer:

3. Constructivist epistemology does not logically entail that constructivist-teaching strategies must be used (or vice-versa).
4. A more defensible model of teaching would combine the virtues of the previous two approaches: it would combine activist teaching methods with a realist epistemology.

It should be apparent from this brief summary that Puolimatka covers a great deal of territory, probably too much to be handled in an essay of restricted length (and certainly far too much when two essays are crammed into the space of one). There are enormous literatures on models of teaching, and particularly on progressivism and constructivism, and the epistemologies of these “isms,” and Puolimatka does not have the space available to examine anything but a few restricted sources. It was the degree of nuance that he had to sacrifice that draws my mild chastisement. It is notable that he does not examine any specific cases of leading traditionalists and progressives, and does not actually tell us who he has in mind as fitting under these appellations!

I should also note that Puolimatka does something that by Erasmus’s reckoning — and mine — is rather dangerous. The realm of educational theory over the past couple of hundred years is complex, to say the least; consider the writings of John Locke, Johann Friedrich Herbart, Herbert Spencer, A.S. Neill, William James, John Dewey, Richard Peters and Paul Hirst, Israel Scheffler, and Ernst von Glasersfeld, just to mention my own favorites. To this picture, add the welter of educational practices that have been adopted: the lecture, the recitation, the Socratic method, the “object lesson,” the discovery method, the project method, to name a few. To define what Dewey would have called a “dualism” (Puolimatka’s “traditional” versus “progressive” models) in an effort to bring order to this complex domain is dangerous, for it risks overlooking nuances, and it can be unfair to the details of the thought of many theorists and the practice of many teachers.

Consider two examples: Richard Peters is usually thought of — and rightfully so — as an educational traditionalist or conservative. He believed that there were forms of knowledge with which students ought to be familiar, and he was not enamoured of Deweyan progressivism. He seems to have been a realist about the nature of knowledge, and he seems to have favored the teacher taking a directive role in the classroom. Yet the fact is often overlooked that neither he, nor very many others, advocated that lessons should be boring and should not engage the enthusiasm and energy of the pupils. (I do not wish to deny that some foolish individuals have held this latter set of bizarre beliefs, but it is unclear to me that they had the field to themselves; there were always opposing voices, and opposing sensible practices. I myself was taught Latin in eighth or ninth grade by a teacher who professed that “any fool can learn something that is interesting; the virtue of Latin grammar is that it is boring and exercises both the willpower and the memory.” He taught the subject accordingly!) In general I agree with Eamonn Callan, who some years ago wrote that:

The idea that the curriculum should be based upon the child’s interests is a case in point. Peters and Hirst would endorse this view so long as it is understood to mean that the curriculum is to be in the child’s interest. That is, the curriculum should benefit the child in some way, but of course no one could sanely doubt that. They also maintain that we should try to implement the curriculum in a manner that excites the interest of students, though again one would be hard-pressed to find anyone who supposes that we should not teach in an interesting manner.¹

To put the point I am making another way, the boundaries of the so-called “traditional” model are extremely fuzzy, and the “within group” variation is perhaps

as great as the “between group” variation. This underscores the need for more careful delineation.

The same point might possibly be made about the “progressive model” (under which rubric Puolimatka includes constructivism). It is noteworthy that the literature on the progressive movement is truly enormous, as is the literature on constructivism (yet Puolimatka cites only one person central to this group, and two commentators). A category that includes Dewey, William Heard Kilpatrick, A.S. Neill, Ernst von Glasersfeld, Kenneth Tobin, Paul Ernest, Rosalind Driver, and thousands of others from across a wide spectrum, is again a difficult one to generalize about after only a couple of pages of discussion.² This is where the second example might be helpful: the work of John Dewey. Although he is the “paradigm case” of a progressive educator, Dewey does not comfortably fit under the description of the progressive model given by Puolimatka. For example, Puolimatka states that the progressive model does not accommodate the teacher’s epistemic authority, and he suggests that all progressives believe the student “should develop her capacity to perceive the world independently and to construct her own epistemic structures from her own perspective.” But even a brief examination of Dewey’s argument in so simple an essay as “The Child and the Curriculum” would dispel this idea, for there it is made clear that Dewey believed the teacher does have an important role to play in leading the child to interact with the “curriculum” (that is, the body of knowledge) that has evolved over the course of intellectual history. The directive role of the teacher will come to our attention again when we turn to Puolimatka’s second essay.

Rather than use precious space to set up this “dualism,” I would have preferred to see Puolimatka argue in more depth for the “conclusion” he reaches in this first essay. The insight he achieves is not a new one, and so far as I can see it does not depend on the dualism he attempted to describe. But it is an important conclusion, that needs to be generalized, and it needs a careful defense so that the many these days who are inclined to doubt it will be convinced of the error of their ways. Let me state this conclusion in a more general form than Puolimatka does: Over the years there have been educators (theorists and practitioners) who held a realist view of the nature of knowledge, but who adopted educational practices that were, or that were close to being, what might be regarded as “progressive.” This should come as no surprise, for it is not the case that one’s realist epistemology forecloses one’s options as a teacher. There is nothing odd about finding realists adopting the project method, or the discovery method, or running their classrooms as “communities of practice” of the sort that Jean Lave, Etienne Wenger, and others advocate. Neither is it necessary that an educator who is avowedly “progressive” with respect to methods adopt the constructivist epistemology of von Glasersfeld, or the social constructivism of the Edinburgh School of radical sociology of knowledge (a position that, at least in the eyes of its adherents, effectively disposes of epistemology altogether).³ *The point is, epistemology and selection of effective (or even of ethically acceptable) teaching methods occupy logically different domains, despite Dewey’s claim that philosophy is the theory of education.*⁴ Puolimatka’s version of this conclusion is too restricted; he says near the end of his first essay that “constructivist approaches to

learning are more appropriately combined with a moderate foundationalism about knowledge”; and he says in passing that “the constructivist view of learning does not logically presuppose the constructivist view of knowledge.”

THE SECOND ESSAY

In the second of his two essays Puolimatka focuses on an entirely different matter: he suggests that the adoption of the progressive approach to teaching can allow the introduction of hidden or indirect forms of indoctrination or manipulation. While again this point is not new, he gives it a fresh twist:

The fact that the progressive approach wants to avoid open authority forces it to resort to various forms of anonymous authority, because complex social settings tend to disintegrate without guidance. Anonymous power molds individual consciousness subconsciously without providing the individual with rational means to assess or even to be conscious of this molding.

Indeed, he claims that traditional teaching methods are weak socializers (weak because the psychological “distance” between the teacher and students is great), while progressive methods are potentially stronger and more effective socializers — and hence more of a potential threat to the autonomy of the student.

I only have space to make one and a half points about this nascent second essay.

First, the manipulative possibilities inherent in progressivism have long been apparent. Earlier I briefly alluded to Dewey’s view that the teacher must arrange experiences to lead students in the direction of the “curriculum,” but we can go back further, to the classic book in this tradition, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile*.⁵ The young hero of that work was supposed to have been educated by nature, and by suffering the natural consequences of his actions, but it is surprising how much nature was given a helping hand by Rousseau’s alter ego, the tutor. Unbeknownst to Emile, the tutor was arranging for “natural” events to occur that would educate the boy in the way that Rousseau desired — from being unable to read the invitation to a birthday party that arrived when the tutor was absent, to meeting with the Savoyard priest “by accident” during a ramble in the countryside. It has been apparent to generations of readers — although they might not have expressed it this way — that young Emile had little chance to develop in an autonomous way, for natural events, carefully orchestrated by the tutor, led him to develop in a direction that had been predetermined. The point of autonomous development, I would think — and I am sure Puolimatka would agree with me — is that whatever it is, it is *not* predetermined!

The half-point, which I do not have the space to develop in a full-blown way, is that it is strange to suggest that the traditional, teacher-centered mode of instruction is kinder to the development of autonomy than is the active or inter-active method espoused by progressive educators. I agree that although the directive methods available to progressive educators are subtle, they are directive nonetheless; but the fact remains that after teachers unleash students and allow them a certain degree of freedom to inquire, the results cannot be guaranteed — the teacher loses a degree of control of the endpoint. The directive possibilities available to the energetic traditional teacher, however, seem to me to be less subject to this

limitation. It is more difficult, I suspect, to exert one's autonomy when one is being closely supervised by an overtly directive martinet than it is when one is only being subtly guided by this martinet! I would have thought that, contra Puolimatka, it was more reasonable to say that both models face about the same possibility of overriding the autonomy of the student (with the weight slightly leaning towards the traditional teacher), and both, when practiced in an enlightened way, have the same potential for enhancing it.

But in this second essay, as in the first, Puolimatka is onto an interesting set of issues. I look forward to seeing the next iteration of both of them.

1. Eamonn Callan, *Autonomy and Schooling* (Kingston, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), 5.

2. For references to key recent works on constructivism, see D.C. Phillips, "How, Why, What, When, and Where: Perspectives on Constructivism in Psychology and Education," *Issues in Education* 3, no. 2 (1997): 151-94.

3. Phillips, "How, Why, What, When, and Where" and D.C. Phillips, "Coming to Grips With Radical Social Constructivisms," *Science and Education* 6, nos. 1-2 (1997): 85-104.

4. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), chaps. 24-26.

5. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile* (London: Dent/Everyman, 1955).