Abstract

Theme: Education widens democracy – or?

This is an argument for restoring and extending the best models of the comprehensive high school with the inclusion of fine academic, vocational, and commercial programs. I argue that, with adequate guidance, teenagers should choose the program they want to follow; such choice should prepare them for life in a liberal democracy. Genuine education for the 21st century should be preparation for a full, satisfying life, not merely for college and economic success. The curriculum for the new century should be organized primarily around problems and themes, de-emphasizing the traditional disciplines.

Key words: democracy · choice · critical thinking · problem/theme oriented curricula

Education and democracy in the 21st century

Nel Noddings

How should we educate for democracy in the 21st century? One powerful lesson we have learned in the last few decades is that the form of life we call «democratic» cannot simply be imposed on cultures unprepared for it. A democracy is not entirely defined by the presence of free and fair voting. In places unprepared for democracy, the losing forces are likely to take up arms to protest the outcome. But what does it mean to be prepared for democracy? And, even within established democracies, how should we prepare our young for democratic life?

I’ll start with a brief discussion of democracy and its major elements and follow that with some observations about changes in global conditions over the last century, both social and environmental, that should affect both our view of democracy and our recommendations for education. Finally, I’ll use this preliminary material to argue that we should move away from traditional education and toward a carefully considered form of progressive education.

Democracy

Readiness for democracy is not signaled by a mere yearning for freedom. Children often express such a yearning, but that does not mean that they are ready for democratic life. Some have ar-
gued that a cultural group or social collective must have a history of deliberative communication in order to support a democracy. Members of the group must already know what it is like to argue their points and justify their claims against opposing views and interests. Indeed we might say that such people are already living in a democracy of sorts even if that form of government has not been officially recognized.

Critical thinking and communication are vital to the democracy that Dewey (1916, p. 87) described as «a mode of associated living». Few would disagree about the importance of thinking and communicating in democratic life but major disagreements arise when we discuss how best to prepare our young to think critically and to communicate effectively. When I use the word democracy in this paper, then, I will usually be referring to deliberative democracy (Englund, 2000).

But established Western democracies are often labeled liberal democracies, and this label is also important to keep in mind as we think about education in the 21st century. The most fundamental concept in liberal democracy is choice or freedom. A common mistake today is to assume that a demand for freedom is a demand for democracy; that is clearly untrue. But an established democracy does pride itself on providing its citizens with a wide range of choices.

If the democracy has retained its deliberative roots, it will encourage and support well-informed choices. A liberal democracy encourages deliberative competence in its citizens but, more important, its very existence may depend on that competence.

We need one more concept for the present purpose. In a society where people participate in deliberative thinking and open communication, there is a sense of equality that is fundamental to democracy. It is not claimed that people must be equal in talents or resources; their views are heard regardless of inequalities in these areas. But, clearly, they must believe that their voices will be heard, and they must be able to communicate effectively.

A society that presses too hard for equality of resources may lose its creative and innovative potential. One that does not try to keep economic inequalities somewhat bounded is likely to produce, first, hopelessness and alienation and then a violent demand for an ill-defined freedom. In hopelessness and alienation, democracy as a mode of associated living is already lost. This tension is caught in the recent debate between traditional liberals and communitarians. For the health of democracy, it is the deliberative debate that is crucial.

Global changes

Just as volumes have been written on the meaning and modes of democracy, many are also appearing on global changes. Nothing like a full treatment can be attempted here. I will mention just a few changes that will figure in my argument for a renewed effort at progressive education.

One important change, important especially for Western democracies, is a change in occupational patterns. The shift from an industrial era to the so-called information age has been much discussed. The U.S., for example, has lost an enormous number of manufacturing jobs, and that has led educators and policymakers to insist that jobs of the future will require higher levels of edu-
cation. However, the loss of manufacturing jobs has been offset by an increase in service and sales jobs. The greatest number of available positions today do not require a college education, and many college graduates are employed in positions that underutilize their education (Hodgkinson, 2005). Yet policymakers and educators continue to stress the need for college education in the new information age. The result, at least in the U.S., is overemphasis on preparation for college and too little attention on education for a flourishing private life and citizenship.

Another major change that must be taken into account in the 21st century is the fast-growing public role of women. This change has spawned other changes: new patterns of family life, of childrearing, and of community activity. All of these should affect the programs and practices of education.

Finally, we must be concerned about environmental changes, the depletion of resources, demographic shifts, and the crucial need to find peaceful solutions to international disputes. This last requires the application of critical thinking to problems that go beyond national boundaries. Attempts to introduce this sort of thinking into U.S. schools often come under heavy criticism, a criticism that employs the 20th century language of patriotism, pride, and power. It is increasingly clear that schooling organized strictly around the traditional disciplines is inadequate to address these problems; such schooling may even exacerbate the problems.

**Educating for deliberative democracy**

For present purposes, I will use traditional to refer to educational programs that use the disciplines to organize the school curriculum. From the traditional perspective, students should study their national language, mathematics, science, history, and foreign languages. Schools may also require some study of music, art, drama, and computer science, but these subjects are considered minor, whereas the disciplines first mentioned are major.

By progressive, I will mean all those approaches that displace the disciplines as the main organizing principle or modify the disciplines in such a way that the traditional, canonical material is replaced by current problems. Dewey’s (1900) curricular recommendations fall largely in the latter category. He recommended a central place for history and geography, for example, but transformed their description in a way unacceptable to traditionalists. Recommendations to replace the disciplines with problems or themes have been made (Noddings, 2005), but they have rarely been tried in secondary schools. An exception is the set of progressive high schools established in the 1930s and evaluated in the Eight-Year Study (Aiken, 1942; Kahne, 1996). I’ll return to this a bit later.

Progressives and traditionalists agree that education should produce people who can think well; people prepared to participate in deliberative democracy and capable of making well-informed choices in a liberal democracy. Indeed, virtually everyone writing on liberal democracy emphasizes the role of a thinking citizenry (Rawls, 1993; Sandel, 1982; Soder, Goodlad & McMannon, 2001). Certainly, thinking is a main theme in Dewey’s approach to education. Today we may want to put equal weight on developing moral and aesthetic sensibilities, and we may well want to emphasize new content relevant to current social problems, but we would not deny the central importance of thinking (Noddings, 2006).

Why, then, have critics of progressive education castigated it as anti-intellectual? In *Educational Wastelands* (1985), Arthur Bestor attacked the whole movement. He insisted
that «genuine education...is intellectual training» or «the power to think.» But then he made a highly questionable claim. He said that the way to do this is to concentrate on «the scientific and scholarly disciplines» (all quotes from Angus & Mirel, 1999, p. 105).

There is little evidence that concentration on the disciplines will produce people capable of critical or deliberative thinking. Some years ago, Michael Scriven, observing a bitter squabble on the UC Berkeley campus, remarked that, when we take a scholar out of his or her discipline, the result is often instant irrationality. Similarly, in responding to Alasdair MacIntyre who has recently recommended a return to highly traditional education for all students in the name of critical thinking, I wrote:

I agree wholeheartedly with MacIntyre that it would be wonderful if «fishing crews and farmers and auto mechanics and construction workers were able to think about their lives critically» (MacIntyre in Dunne & Hogan, 2004, p. 14). It would be equally wonderful if the same could be said of the graduates of our finest institutions of liberal education...Some liberally educated people think deeply, critically, and morally; many do not. (Noddings, 2004, p. 164)

Further, if we look about us with open minds, we find many people without college educations who can think well (Rose, 2005). This is not to say that all, or even most, workers with no higher education are competent critical thinkers. However, many show a capacity for such thinking, and it is not often developed through systematic study of the disciplines (Freire, 1970). It is usually developed through encounters with challenging everyday problems and opportunities to explore and debate possible solutions to these problems (Day, 1952; Horton, 1998).

Even if disciplinary study is to be undertaken at the college level, it is unclear that such study is required in high school. The Eight-Year Study showed convincingly that an experiential course of study organized around the problems of youth and themes of democracy could prepare students well for college (see Kahne, 1996). Faced with evidence that progressive schools were, thus, successful, many critics nevertheless continued their assault. Some claimed that the methodology of the Study was faulty, although this was never adequately demonstrated. Others seemed unable to credit anything that clashed with their own educational backgrounds and intuitions. Ignoring the evidence entirely one critic wrote:

If we must have such things as ineffective, disorderly Progressive education, [I suggest] that it be limited to the lowest 25 percent in intelligence where it will do little harm and that the rest of the pupils be given the opportunity to benefit from a stimulating, practical, well-balanced standard curriculum. (quoted in Kahne, 1996, p. 142)

This kind of argument, however, offended thoughtful traditional educators. Bestor, for example, argued that students from all socio-economic groups should be engaged in the standard, discipline-centered curriculum: «To assert that intellectual capacity decreases as one reaches down into lower economic levels of the population is to deny, pointblank, the basic assumptions of democratic egalitarianism» (quoted in Angus & Mirel, 1999, p. 106). This is the sort of argument we hear today against tracking in our schools. It is powerful, but it needs to be carefully analyzed, and the analysis should illustrate the kind of deliberative thinking required in a deliberative democracy.

First, progressives should agree with Bestor-like traditionalists that students should not be sorted by socio-economic (or racial) status according to what Charles Eliot called «their evident or probable destinies» (quoted
in Kliebard, 1995, p. 106). All tracks, all courses should be open to all students, and placement should be decided by well-informed choice. Further, choice—as a basic principle of liberal democracy—should be discussed often in all classes. There should be no assignment based on tests, past grades, or arbitrary assumptions.

Progressives should agree, again, with traditionalists that some of the non-standard courses offered have been shoddy, downright pathetic. But the remedy is to make every course substantial, not to abandon differentiated courses. People who advocate one (traditional) course of study for all students (Adler, 1982) forget that many students find traditional courses boring, difficult, and irrelevant. In 1929, Alfred North Whitehead (1967, p. 7) criticized the traditional curriculum. He objected that instead of teaching material relevant to life:

Instead of this single unity, we offer children - Algebra, from which nothing follows; Geometry, from which nothing follows; a Couple of Languages, never mastered; and lastly, most dreary of all, Literature, represented by the plays of Shakespeare, with philological notes and short analyses of plot and character… Can such a list be said to represent Life, as it is known in the midst of the living of it?

Whitehead was not opposed to the teaching of mathematics, and he certainly cannot be accused of anti-intellectualism. To the contrary, he saw clearly that there is something anti-intellectual in valuing subject matter far removed from life over material that arises directly from it.

Traditionalists might respond to these complaints (as I did for progressives) that the poor quality of courses is not a reason for abandoning them. Rather, they should be strengthened, enriched. But this may not work, although I'll revisit the possibility toward the end of this article. It is not just that traditional courses are poorly presented; the subject matter itself is felt by many students to be irrelevant; they have no interest in it. They may very well have keen interest and talent for other worthwhile studies. Deprived of alternative, relevant courses, they are doubly wounded; they do poorly in the required classes, and they are not offered courses in which they might do well.

Traditionalists who grieve over the demise of disciplinary rigor should be reminded that differentiated courses made high school accessible to a huge number of students who would otherwise not have attended. In the U.S., the graduation rate went from about 6% in 1900 to over 50% in 1940 and more than 70% by 1970. This is an astonishing accomplishment.

Now, of course, the response often is, What good is it to graduate if the student has learned nothing? Here we should repeat our commitment to strengthening courses. But we should also point out that people who possess the high school diploma earn about $250,000 more in a lifetime than those who fail to get a diploma. The credential is significant in itself. Moreover, students who graduate from high school are more likely to seek further education of some sort, whereas those who drop out may simply give up on formal training of all kinds (Shipler, 2004). Since the U.S. has renewed the emphasis on academic coursework for all students, we have experienced a drop in high school completion rates, and the problem may grow worse under the current program of high-stakes testing.

Today traditionalists, and many teachers who are not well-informed, argue that the occupational world has changed dramatically. We are now living in the information age, and young people will need more knowledge than previous generations in order to gain employment. As I noted earlier, this
may not be true. The argument is similar to the one progressives used early in the 20th century to promote differentiated courses; in the great industrial age, it was argued that students needed a high school education, and the nation needed to educate for citizenship.

This was an argument sustained by the results. Today’s argument, however, is based on faulty information. In the U.S. (and most of the Western world), it is forecast that there will be about three times as many jobs in fields requiring no college education as in the «knowledge world,» and already many college graduates are working at jobs that do not require college education. Accompanying the knowledge world, supporting it, is an even bigger one – the service world.

So far I’ve argued that a deliberative conversation among educators and policymakers would reveal many strengths in progressive approaches to secondary education: appeal to large numbers of students, relevance to real life problems, and adequate preparation for either college or work. I’ve argued, too, that progressive approaches more nearly meet the ideal of equality, but this strength is premised on our renewed commitment to intellectually rich courses and a rejection of the practice of assigning students to tracks on the basis of test scores rather than interests and well-informed choices.

One major obstacle to progressive education in the 21st century is an apparent unwillingness to engage in deliberative dialogue. In a recent issue of Phi Delta Kappan, Mark Windschitl (2006) points to this unwillingness (or inability?) to talk to one another about science teaching. Progressives tend to caricature traditionalists as stiff, boring, and out of touch. Traditionalists blame progressives or reformers (Windschitl labels his progressive program «reform») for everything they fear has been lost in schools. Among the criticisms Windschitl has suffered: «People like you are the reason good science and technology jobs are going overseas»; «You are not talking about science, but about life skills, citizenship, and current events»; «You want to make science interesting by avoiding as much science as possible»; «Educators [like you] place no value in learning the basic facts of science»; «I have no criticism of giving high school students general knowledge about the environment, health, chemistry, and genetics, but don’t call it science. Call it ‘popular science.’ Then offer courses in real science…»

Windschitl gives some suggestions on how to improve our discussions by concentrating on classroom scenarios and questions directed to what students should know and be able to do. But I suspect that we will have to answer the attacks directly, patiently, and repeatedly. Consider the last charge, one that contrasts «popular» and «real» science. Here we encounter a complex set of philosophical problems. What is it that we want students to know? When should people be credited with knowing?

In everyday life, most of what we claim to know is known by reference to an authority. This is not a way of knowing that pleases epistemologists (Williams, 2002) but, in a world swamped with information, it is the way in which we must function. If pressed, we should more properly say that we believe rather than know most of the things in our store of knowledge. What we mean is that we are calling on dependable authorities and that we trust them to have checked their claims against the most highly regarded criteria of knowledge in their field.

Mathematical results should be traced through a valid chain of reasoning to original premises we have some reason to accept. Scientific results should rest on empirical evidence widely accepted in the field. But as individuals we cannot possibly verify, as experts must, all the things we claim to know.
And yet things concerning health, the environment, genetics, use of computers, the operation of machinery, and a host of other matters are things we must know if we are to operate effectively in today’s world. Thus, a strong argument can be made for what the critic so cavalierly calls «popular» science.

In such courses, time should be spent on basic (not too technical) epistemology. Students should learn something about how knowledge is generated in various fields and how one might go about checking knowledge claims. This is a crucial matter in the 21st century when so much information comes to us through the internet. On which sources can we reasonably depend? Do they agree, or are there sharp differences?

Discussions such as these also open the door to serious consideration of professional and academic ethics. Truthfulness is greatly prized in the world of knowledge production. It is prized not only for its own sake but because the whole enterprise depends on it. A scientist who fabricates results or otherwise lies damages the whole fabric of science and weakens the trust of a public that depends on that source for its knowledge. This, students should come to appreciate, is why plagiarism and the «fudging» of data are considered major crimes in academic life.

I want to pause here to give an example that should strengthen the case I am trying to make for popular science or, better, science for democratic citizens. Parts of New York city (and many other places in the world) are experiencing a near-epidemic of diabetes. In a series of powerful articles in the New York Times (January 10–14, 2006), case after case revealed appalling ignorance concerning the disease. One fifteen-year-old with the disease compared diabetes with «a cold.» She weighs more than 280 lb. and is not troubled by her weight. In school, she is failing English, math, science, and history. She is taking these courses, we may suppose, because she is required, in the name of equality of opportunity, to take «real» courses. What about an equal opportunity to life itself? Students like this youngster need courses in health, physical education, and how to find reliable information.

When Whitehead criticized courses (like algebra) «from which nothing follows,» he could have been criticizing most of what we do today in high schools. Most of our courses are designed to prepare students for the next course in the same discipline; the next course is all that follows. It should not surprise us, then, that most of the facts and highly specialized skills (such as factoring polynomials) are swiftly forgotten when there is no «next course» to take.

There must be a place in our high schools for the disciplines qua discipline, however, because some students are interested in them and will use them in the future. For them, it is enough that the next course «follows.» Just how to handle this must be the subject of a much longer exposition, but two things should be clear as a starting point for that discussion: (i) These courses, preceded by courses designed to expose students to disciplinary possibilities, should be elective; they should be chosen, not required. (ii) They should not be considered higher or more valuable than other courses; otherwise, the hierarchical tracking problem will re-emerge.

Many more stories of the sort reported by the New York Times on diabetes could be offered on other topics. Surely the great increase in the number of women working outside the home raises substantial issues for educational planning. If we had followed progressive advice early in the 20th century, homemaking and parenting would have been major elements in the school curriculum (National Education Association, 1918). We did not. In the 21st century, both girls and boys need to know something about home management, parenting, the variety of
ways to make a home, the obstacles to happy home life, and development of organic habits in early home life. The history of homes, parenting, and childhood can be fascinating, and relevant material can be found in our finest literature.

Today we need open and continuous study of gender, not only for life in home and family, but also in connection with the social construction of masculinity and femininity. Is the warrior model supported by a questionable view of masculinity? Can much of the world’s violence be traced to this model? Has the dominant picture of femininity been complicit in the maintenance of the warrior model?

Students also should learn about advertising and propaganda—and not just in a few paragraphs in social studies. Most American students would be astonished to hear that, in much of the Western world, drug companies are not allowed to advertise directly to the public. What a relief it is to watch television in Europe or Israel and see no drug ads! They should hear about the influence of advertising in establishing all sorts of practices, such as the maintenance of large lawns for private homes, that might be questioned from an ecological perspective. If we were to resist advertising, would our economies collapse? They might.

And there is the matter of religion. We live in an age characterized by a paradoxical growth in both secularism and fundamentalism. The latter (in all three great monotheistic faiths) threatens world peace and, at the national level, deliberative democracy. Is it impossible for schools to address the logic of religious beliefs? Can deliberative democracies ignore frightening illogic in the name of tolerance? Is there no sensitive, respectful way to treat such issues?

Suggestions

To maintain itself, a liberal democracy must educate for deliberative citizenship (Gutmann, 1987). Such an education should support citizens in making well-informed choices in both private and public life. I have suggested here that the traditional curriculum, one organized around the standard disciplines, is inadequate for this purpose.

One solution, entirely compatible with liberal democracy, is to offer citizens a choice within the public school system to enroll their children in either traditional or progressive schools or programs. In all but the smallest schools, both traditional and progressive programs could be offered (Noddings, 2005). This solution has several advantages: It would encourage public deliberation at the family and community level; it would offer a promising opportunity to compare the qualities and results of the two different approaches; and it would encourage both groups to study and improve their own ways of educating. If this solution is thought to be impossible or unworkable, what does this say about the state of our democracy?

Another solution, more modest than the first but perhaps even more threatening to the traditionalist, is to launch a campaign to transform the disciplines as they are presented in high schools. This solution is very much in the Deweyan tradition. It would require teachers of all subjects to treat social themes, youth problems, and political issues regularly in their classes; to involve students where feasible in the choice of courses, learning objectives, and modes of evaluation; to create a democratic setting in which students would learn how to take a position, support it with adequate evidence, and communicate it effectively to their peers and teachers. It would stimulate the gradual abandonment of strict disciplinary lines. An
objection to this approach is that it requires broadly, deeply educated teachers. It is worth noting that this objection, together with the paradoxically opposite one of anti-intellectualism, was also raised against Dewey’s suggestions.

If we were to move in this direction, we would also elevate the arts to a more significant place in the curriculum, and we would put greater emphasis on what are now called «extra-curricular» activities. It is largely within these activities that teenagers find opportunities to work cooperatively toward mutually agreed upon goals. In a deliberative democracy, we would no longer suppose that «education» is dispensed only in subject matter classes as subject matter. Rather, the whole day, studied and supported as a mode of associated living, would provide a genuine education for deliberative democracy.

In conclusion, I should remind readers that I am not recommending a return to reconstruction, child-centered curricula, the project method, or any exact copy of Deweyan experimentalism, although I believe we can learn a lot by re-analyzing these programs. A progressive approach is, broadly construed, one that offers a carefully constructed alternative to the traditional centrality of the disciplines. Viewed that way, progressive education did revolutionize secondary education in the 20th century and made high school graduation possible for multitudes. Now, at the start of the 21st century, we have even more compelling reasons to move away from the outdated and inadequate traditional curriculum.

Literature


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