

Making Distinctions: The Liberal Educator's Secret

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Francis Schrag is right to pinpoint a tension between the liberal educator's perfectionist inclinations, on the one hand, and the commitment to fostering the development of each student's capacity to live as full and rich a life as they can. Simply put: while we hope that everyone will at least be able to find some aspect of their schooling to be rewarding in some way, we also know that some people are simply more talented or, perhaps, more passionate about and invested in some things than others. Under the right conditions, these people will do better at these things than others. While egalitarian educators know they ought not discourage such people, they are less certain about how they ought to distribute their energy in the face of these inequalities of character and capability.¹ Among liberal and radical egalitarians alike, there is agreement that those educational inequalities that are a direct result of structural inequalities of race, class, gender, linguistic ability, or physical disability require redress, either through the redistribution of educational resources at the very least (from the perspective of liberals), or via the sorts of political and economic transformations advocated by more radical egalitarians. But what about the sorts of differences that are not directly attributable to these sorts of social inequalities? These sorts of differences — of raw talent, perhaps, or a passionate drive to excel in a particular activity — are the focus of Schrag's concern in this paper.

To be sure, these differences in intellectual, aesthetic, and athletic ability give rise to other sorts of social hierarchies, the effects of which can be as debilitating as inequalities that are more directly attributable to racial and socioeconomic injustice. Still, it seems to Schrag that perfectionism has become the radical egalitarian educator's dirty little secret. This is why he sees a need to remind us that the practice of making distinctions is at the heart of what we do, as teachers and as educational theorists.

To Schrag, as to most of us, there are some texts, theories and practices in any particular field at a given moment in that field's development that are deemed more worthy of close study and appreciation. Similarly, there are some students who are both more interested in engaging with more complex (and presumably more rewarding) material and better able to do so. These are the students that keep many teachers in the profession, and the absence of such students drives many teachers out of it. Why then, Schrag asks, do so many educational theorists seem to want to disavow the very perfectionist inclinations they themselves must harbor? Schrag enjoins us to fess up to our role in this "hierarchical republic of letters":

Let us be honest...we public school and public university teachers, representatives of the liberal state, play a crucial role in establishing inequalities of recognition and in allocating individuals to positions in a society marked by enormous inequalities in wealth and political power.

In the face of this heady responsibility, Schrag is not surprised that liberal educators attempt to find ways “of reducing the tension between their joint commitments to perfectionism and equality.” What he is surprised by are the lengths to which some social theorists go in their efforts to downplay or deny the educational hierarchy of taste and truth altogether. Schrag’s paper is thus only partly about the need for liberal educators to find a just way to reconcile their perfectionist inclinations with their egalitarian commitments. It is mostly a pointed critique of the many ways in which various sorts of radical egalitarians have attempted to sidestep or disavow the hierarchies of taste and truth that permeate the practice of education. Schrag takes each of these radical egalitarians to task for refusing to admit that their view of the world is premised on a particular hierarchy of values and a set of expectations that they do not make explicit. Indeed, some go so far as to disavow that such standards are valid as anything other than a ruse of power.

To Schrag, it is simply not good enough to suggest, along with E.D. Hirsch and Pierre Bourdieu, that “educated people don’t acquire knowledge because it is good; it becomes good because educated people acquire it.” But perhaps because Schrag’s paper is largely an attempt to expose the shortcomings of these crypto-perfectionists, he does not elaborate on the criteria used to determine assessments of worth in particular domains. They have something to do with truth (in the case of the sciences and social sciences) and with taste (in the case of the arts and literature), but both of these are such contested terms that we need to know more about what Schrag understands them to mean.

The closest we get to some sense of this is toward the beginning of his paper, when Schrag briefly outlines the process through which hierarchies of value are established and maintained. We learn that while these standards are doubtless contested — “sometimes bitterly” — there is nonetheless broad agreement within particular domains about what is more and or less worthy of study. He also acknowledges that what is deemed worthwhile changes over time (presumably as a result of these contestations). And finally, he notes that what counts as excellent work in a particular domain is decided by those who are familiar with the norms and practices of the field. Because they know something of the trajectory of developments — past and present — in their field, they are in a position to be able to make distinctions between better and worse ways of making arguments, conducting experiments, or performing a piece of music. In other words, the hierarchy of values that holds court in specific domains is not handed down unchanged from generation to generation of scholars and performers. It is periodically subject to reappraisal, revisions, expansions of what counts as worthwhile knowledge in a particular domain, or indeed, a blurring of the boundaries between particular domains. The fact that these judgments are arrived at intersubjectively indicates that all of these things are bound to happen.

I have dwelt upon — and extended — Schrag’s too brief but nonetheless suggestive indication of how judgments of worth are arrived at for two reasons. First, because I think that greater attention to the complex processes through which hierarchies of taste and truth are established offers an important counterpoint to

notions of “intrinsic worth” invoked by Schrag at various points in his paper. And second, because I think that demystifying the process of judgment formation in this way pushes liberal educators to do more than simply “fess up” to our role in the formation of these hierarchies of value. It urges us to find ways to make the process seem less arbitrary and mysterious to those who are most likely to find them so, and who are thus most likely to be disenfranchised by their schooling. In short, I am suggesting that making the process of making distinctions more transparent is one way of making educational institutions more fair. This conception of fairness is quite different from those put forward by radical egalitarian critiques of hierarchies of value in that it does not suggest that all academic pursuits and accomplishments are equal. It is a liberal conception of fairness that suggests that good reasons can and indeed, must, be given to justify a particular judgment of taste (in the arts) or truth (in the natural and human sciences). Further, it makes clear that the reasons proffered are not beyond critique and contestation, but neither are they completely arbitrary. They are the products of the particular disciplinary trajectories, practices, and assumptions that form the “background of shared judgments” to which Schrag refers, and which I am suggesting ought to be foregrounded.

A caveat is needed to temper my call for greater transparency about the grounds for the distinctions made within particular academic domains, because there is much about the process of making distinctions that cannot be articulated and a great deal that is not easily articulated. We develop a sense of better and worse by exposure and experience more than anything. Perhaps this is why it is so difficult for university professors to design grading rubrics, as we are increasingly asked to do in this climate of academic accountability. These rubrics are supposed to help students understand the criteria that distinguish, for example, an average essay from a good one. Now, it is interesting to note that although drawing up these rubrics is quite difficult, actually figuring out which essays are average and which are good is easier. Teachers who are well versed in their fields just know which essays are better. The challenge then is not simply a matter of fessing up to our perfectionist inclinations but of facing the more difficult task of figuring out first, how practitioners in particular fields develop this sort of knowledge and expertise, and second, what we might do to structure our students’ educational experiences in our particular fields so that those who are most likely to be mystified by the process are less so. Schrag has taken us part of the way. I hope that I have taken the process a step further.

1. To take just two recent philosophers of education who admit to the difficulties in this regard: Harry Brighouse, *School Choice and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 128-31 and David Carr, *Making Sense of Education* (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003), 208-11.