The Preconditions for Pandemic Pedagogy

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The excellent essay by Brenda Seals and Greg Seals attempts to understand the apparent failure of the US response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As I write, over 500,000 people have died from the disease. The death rate per 100,000 citizens in the US is currently at 144.09, which places it in the top ten of all countries. Far below are countries like New Zealand and Vietnam.[1] It is fair to ask what makes these other countries seemingly more successful. Seals and Seals argue that, at least in the case of Vietnam (0.04 deaths per 100,000), the answer is more effective public health education campaigns. The authors draw on educational theory to suggest why Vietnam's campaigns were more effective.

Seals and Seals develop a theory about what creates a teachable moment, or more metaphorically, what creates "educational energy." They argue that educational moments happen when curriculum is personally meaningful to students, when content seems applicable, and when learning occurs within a context of trusting interpersonal relationships. Their scheme is similar, as they point out, to Dewey's famous analysis of "continuity" and "interaction," as well as to ideas from other important educational thinkers such as Kieran Egan (emphasizing developmental stages of meaning and imagination), James A. Beane (emphasizing both big picture and personal dimensions of curricular coherence), and Miriam Raider-Roth (emphasizing trust between teachers and students).Vietnam health authorities, the authors argued, used a public health approach that mirrored these educational ideas, creating "educational energy" and teachable moments. Above all, there was a consistent and coherent message from health author-

ities. As for the US response, well, we all know how that has played out: While Vietnam had a clear and consistent message, we were busy talking about drinking bleach.

The article ends with a compelling call for collaboration between educational theorists and public health educators. I whole-heartedly endorse this suggestion. COVID has taught us many things, among them, that our current ways of thinking about public discourse, including public health, are simply not working. The authors are surely right to urge a different approach, and the best educational thinking will indeed be required as part of this process.

As I think about this essay and reflect on the United States – a big, booming, boisterous, badly-behaving country – I try to imagine a successful public health campaign, along the lines of what apparently happened in Vietnam. And then I think of all the nonsense we have seen: the hordes of anti-lockdown protestors, undergraduate students partying on campuses, conspiracies to kidnap health-conscious gover-nors, armed militia surrounding the houses of state health directors, and so forth. And, with all this in mind, I wonder, How did we get to this point? And what, really, would have made a difference?

As I see it, there are a number of obstacles to offering a coherent and consistent message in our chaotic context. First, there is the longstanding anti-authoritarian and anti-intellectual impulse in this country,[2] which perhaps has recently taken on a bit more strident anti-science and anti-medical gloss. Also new is that this anti-intellec-tualism and anti-expertism has become amplified by people with the highest positions of public responsibility and by media companies with large megaphones and big audiences. We are now in an alternate universe from what happened in Vietnam: in the US, people who ques-tion public health authorities are celebrated as folk heroes of liberty,

and those who have their platforms removed for purveying spurious information become martyrs of the sinister "cancel culture."

This anti-authoritarianism is not an easy issue to resolve, even theoretically. After all, we do want to encourage the questioning of authorities and experts, and we want schools to teach students this disposition, at least to some extent. Certainly, cultural elites, hailing from the best universities, can have blinders to certain truths and experiences. Even science should be subject to skepticism. A popular expression for enlightened politicians is that they will "follow the scientists." The problem is, of course, that science always involves probabilities and uncertainties, and it cannot ultimately resolve questions of value, like economic growth versus public health. Science can only inform questions of public policy. The philosopher/entertainer Paul Feyerabend said many wrong and outlandish things about science – but he was right to point out that science becomes problematic in democracy when it becomes a structure of political authority.[3]

Another reason for the muddled message is that there was (and is) legitimate scientific disagreement about COVID, at lease about the relative worth of masks, about the space needed for proper social distancing, about appropriate treatments for COVID, about vaccine efficacy against new strains, and so forth. When scientific debate and uncertainty is aired so publicly, when opinions and research do battle so visibly on a public stage, public confidence is going to wane. And the solution isn't clear: we should not want to limit scientific debate, nor should we seek to hide from the public news about ongoing scientific debates. So, again, we have a real dilemma: science is messy and confusing to the public, and this will work against clear and consistent messaging.

Another confounding variable in all of this is political polariza-

tion, which research shows to be particularly high right now in histori-cal terms.[4] We seem to live in an age of what has been called "negative partisanship," which is defining one's politics according to a dislike, even loathing, of members of out-group political parties. This is more and more the driving force behind many people's political activity.[5] One effect of these feelings is that any policy that comes to be con-nected to the opposing political party becomes immediately unpopular, even as the merits of the proposal remain unchanged.[6] All one has to do is link public health information to partisan cues, spread that link through cable channels and social media, and suddenly the information – innocuous and commonsensical before the partisan cues – will be rejected by half of the American public.

In the face of the problems facing the American context, I find myself feeling doubtful that public health strategies informed by educational theory would make too much of a difference, although I certainly encourage giving it a try. The challenges the pandemic has revealed in our public discourse go much deeper than public health strategies. If the social conditions are not right, even the best public health publicity strategy will fail. There is a need to start much earlier, shaping those social conditions before pandemics arise. A major chal-lenge, again, is that the reasons behind our lack of clear and consistent health messaging are complex. There are good reasons to sometimes be skeptical of authority and science, and there are good reasons for allowing messy scientific debate to play out publicly. Given this, the question becomes: how can we improve collective problem solving (in this and other areas) without also undermining an open society and a healthy impulse to question authorities and science?

I think one realistic goal is to try to encourage a more nuanced view of science and scientific authority. The answer is not to further

exalt scientific authority, or to portray it as the last word on controversial issues, or to assume that science holds all the answers to questions of public policy. I think these messages are already sent, intentionally or not, in how we sometimes approach science education in schools. This exaltation of science leads to disillusionment as the messy underbelly of science is exposed to the public. Portraying the process as messy from the beginning – imperfect, perhaps, but bending towards truth – will give people a much better idea of what to expect in public deliberation, particularly in times of crisis. We should also give students a much better sense of the politics of science, that is, where science can help in political decision-making, but also where moral values must carry the day.

Another strategy might be to find ways to undermine reflexive polarization and negative partisanship. In a sense, we need to learn to think critically about how our in-group identifications might by warping our sense of public policy and our feelings of community. There is, thankfully, some literature on how this might be overcome. Some of the suggestions include those from a team at Cambridge University: meaningful and sustained intergroup contact, exercises in perspective taking, and development of superordinate identities and goals that go beyond political identifications.[7]

I think working on scientific and civic competencies is an important precondition for any successful public health campaign, at least in the US context. Only with these preconditions in place, I suspect, will a public health campaign, hopefully guided by educational theory as Seals and Seals helpfully suggest, be effective and save human lives.

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1 Johns Hopkins University, "Mortality Analysis," Coronavirus Resource Center, February 11, 2021, https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality.

2 Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964).

3 Paul Feyerabend, "How to Defend Society against Science," in *Introductory Readings in the Philosophy of Science*, eds. E.D. Klemke, Robert Hollinger, and David Wyss Rudge (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1998): 54-65.

4 Carroll Doherty, "7 Things to Know about Polarization in America," *Pew Research Center: Facttank,* June 12, 2014, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/12/7-things-to-know-about-polarization-in-america/.
5 Shanto Iyengar, Gaurav Sood, and Yphtach Lelkes, "Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2012): 405–431.

6 Carlee Beth Hawkins and Brian A Nosek, "Motivated independence? Implicit party identity predicts political judgments among self-proclaimed Independents," *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin* 38, no. 11 (2012): 1437-52.

7 Lee de-Wit, Sander van der Linden, and Cameron Brick, "What Are the Solutions to Political Polarization?" *Greater Good Magazine*, July 2, 2019, https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what_are_the_solutions_to_political_polarization.