

DECOLONIZING PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE

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I'm delighted to have the opportunity to comment on Frank Margonis' paper. I found it, as I always find Frank in person, full of rich and interesting ideas. Because there is much here I found provocative, I discovered it was difficult to pick a direction in which to take my remarks.

I was tempted on first blush to try to chip away at Frank's reading of Dewey's position on the "problem" of personhood and citizenship and/or his reading of Dewey's notion of experience, then to try to propose an alternative reading on the meaning of Dewey's scientific method. But the traditional strategy of taking one another on by point-by-point refutation within assumptions of misreading holds little appeal for me after long exposure to feminist literature and my recent (re)viewing of Harold Bloom's essay on the *necessity* of misreading. How to enact a different model of response becomes part of my task.

I certainly share Frank's concerns about the assimilationist tendencies lurking in our poorly understood "Enlightenment faiths" and the current conceptions of what constitutes "truly" liberatory pedagogical practice on the part of leftist educators. Because I am particularly worried about continued investments in unproblematized foundationalist concepts such as personhood, authenticity, dialogue, moral action, community, and citizenship, I decided to limit my remarks to the last section of Frank's paper. Besides, I appreciated the heading: "Abandoning the Problem of Personhood and Citizenship."

I first read that heading as signaling a move to challenge the foundationalist concepts of "person" and "citizen." Indeed, questioning who qualifies for "personhood" — as a "subject" of history, a claimant before the law, a citizen — and exposing by what differential and exclusionary means such foundational notions as these are constituted has long been on feminist agendas. Carole Pateman's work, which Frank cites in this last section, has helped us to recognize that within most of the discourse of leftist pedagogy — for example, the educational politics of emancipatory rationality and citizenship education — has been articulated in epistemic relations to the *liberal* conception of equality and participatory democracy. To be sure, as Frank points out, the emancipatory rationality that underpins liberatory pedagogy has been based on the principles of critique and action. But the particular problem for women is that in the liberal democratic state, as in liberal democratic theory, critique and action historically have been the prerogatives of men empowered to inscribe and exchange critique and action in the formal public discourse of policy making (educational, social, political). This discourse is and has been located squarely in the (male) individualism constitutive of the public sphere. The conceptual *relocation* into the public of the feminine, which is still theoretically tied in liberal theory to the historical private/nuclear family/mothering nexus, leaves the dichotomous and gendered political structure intact. This move merely frees women in the private to assume locations in the public *in addition to* retaining their "natural" caretaker positions in the private. It does not theoretically rewrite the masculinist public position which is where — unencumbered by the trivial concerns and interests of the private — the politics of universal, common, and (androcentric) human interests are inscribed. Conceptual tactics which have surfaced in leftist pedagogical literature, such as granting "voice" to girls or promoting "dialogue" in the public sphere of the democratic classroom — indeed, conceptual compensatory notions of all sorts — do not begin to address the fundamental problems of the gendered requirements of democratic

participation or of citizenship. For this reason and others, I urge abandoning the “problem” as traditionally conceptualized, not only in schools but, I would add, in the philosophical domain as well.

While I think Frank might find all this very interesting, this is not what he meant by his heading. Frank proposes that we redirect our attention, in the classroom at least, to what he sees as a teacher’s most fundamental charge: developing a meaningful relation with students congruent with the student’s own practices and culture. While fully recognizing that these are not easily established, meaningful relations are, in his view, “the basic prerequisite for good education” of any kind. Frank goes on to describe these relationships as having the following characteristics: active engagement by all parties, intellectual commitments “called out” by the dynamics of the relation spurred by a concern for the project itself, and, perhaps most crucial to my remarks, the pursuit together of difficult ideas and tasks which challenge all to reach insights *beyond* their previous considerations. While this may leave many wanting more, because the actual character of the relation is so fully contextual, I think Frank rightly refuses to give us more *ahead of time* about what this relation will look like. He can, however, be specific about what he doesn’t want to happen in the classroom: that is for a teacher to place *any* agenda before constructing particular relations with each student, relations grounded in an understanding and acceptance of the diverse backgrounds, goals, interests, ways of thinking, views of the world, etc., that each brings with her to class. He wants relations which enable teachers to “call out,” as he puts it, student’s abilities, their strengths. The direction any educative experience should then take depends upon the character of the relationship that develops.

Now, I absolutely endorse the notion that teachers need to engage students in a process of understanding that is premised on their own historical specificity and on the simultaneous, if often contradictory, presence of differences in each of its instances and practices. Doing that, however, may present us with a complication we want to address.

If, in our efforts to establish meaningful educative relations with students, we take as self-evident the appearance of their cultural identities, “abilities,” “strengths,” dispositions or “projects,” we risk promoting the idea that they are “natural.” That is, that there are “*natural*” abilities and cultural differences, something inevitable or determined, something that is *there* simply waiting to be “called out” or expressed, something that exists *in* us in the form it was given in a particular historical moment. While we can not dismiss the very “real” effects of our specificities, our identities or projects, or deny that behavior can be explained in terms of their operation, we also don’t want to mis-take an effect for a cause. One of the *educational* burdens for a teacher, I think, is to escape the circularity of merely recognizing “perceivable givens” as self-evident differences, a circularity in which only what is known — difference, in this case can be seen. How to address this tension becomes the question.

The trick is to relieve these categories — “identity,” “strengths,” “abilities,” “differences” — of their traditional foundational weight even as we engage in terms of the “facts” of them. In other words, an educational practice may be to establish meaningful relations from the “givenness” of specificity, “difference” if you will, as we simultaneously work to explore how such difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world. For that we need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences. To do this a partial change of subject/object seems to be required, one which takes the emergence of concepts and cultural identities as historical events in need of explanation. A way to embrace the tension is to have teachers, in constructing relations with students, take as part of their project not merely the unproblematized expressions of students but also an engagement with them of an analysis of the production of that expression. Thus understood, all students can see, for instance, how “choice” itself is not a property of autonomous moral agents acting in an existential vacuum, but rather something that is created and exercised within the interaction of social, psychic, political, and economic forces of everyday experience. Pressing the claim of the local, then, need not

mean calcifying the concepts of ability or difference, if we at the same time attempt to read the processes of differentiation — processes always underway.

Activities continuously designed to both recognize *and* historicize the identities or projects experiences produce begin to help refigure history and open up ways for thinking anew about “meaningful educative relationships.” Finally, and I think this is of primary educative concern, these practices can offer students the opportunity to (re)present themselves in ways which suggest that they can imagine differently in order to act otherwise. Now, if I haven’t completely overridden Frank’s ontological commitment in an effort to address concerns of essentialism, maybe this would fit within his set of characteristics for meaningful educative relationships. But I expect we’ll have to talk about it.

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