

Who Will Educate the Educators?

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Heather Voke undertakes two formidable tasks in her essay: she identifies the attitudes required for students to participate in communicative democracy; and she describes the educational experiences to cultivate those attitudes. Voke is concerned, in particular, with what has come to be called “the problem of communicating across difference,” the problem that “individuals with vastly different experiences and perspectives [and speech cultures] will need to be able to communicate with one another across these differences.” Given I am in accord with Voke’s purposes, and appreciative of the contribution she has made, I want to assist her project by complicating it even further, in the hope of bringing greater precision to our educational task.

I begin by noting the obvious: not all differences are alike. Unfortunately the happy phrase “communicating across difference” can occlude that fact — a fact that I believe has profound consequences. It would be a mistake, I think, to discuss the cultivation of attitudes required for communicative democracy without attending to some of the more egregious problems that go under such clumsy names as “racism” and “sexism,” to take just two examples.

I want to be sure we attend to particular differences, those that construct what Laurence Thomas calls “diminished social categories”¹ because the differences I see posing the greatest challenge are those that are a result of social relations between groups that are structured oppositionally and hierarchically, groups that Iris Young has persuasively argued constitute individuals (for example, girls/boys, blacks/whites, gays/heterosexuals).² With such groups the problem is, sometimes, not that there is no communication across difference, but rather communication occurs to reinforce the structures of opposition and hierarchy. If we look at Voke’s project with these sorts of differences in mind certain problems emerge that require our attention.

If I read them right, Young, Dewey and Voke agree that as individuals come together with diverse others to discuss “similar concerns” or a “common problem” they will develop the attitudes necessary to communicate across differences. The three immediate problems I see are these: (1) we cannot so easily rely on experience; (2) we cannot count on their being perceived “common problems” or shared “similar concerns;” and (3) we cannot overemphasize the role of the skillful educator. In the cases at hand, where group relations involve “downward social constitution,” the sorts of experiences required to cultivate the desired attitudes of equal respect, openness, and mutual accountability might be possible only if the students already have, or are beginning to have, these attitudes.³ Once we realize the truth of the claim that experience is *produced* not simply *registered*⁴ we see that we face the formidable problem of how to get experiences to change hegemonic patterns of interpretation.⁵ The difficulty is expressed in the questions: Why should we think

people will concur there is a “common problem” or “similar concerns?” and, Why should we think the experience of conversing about them would generate the insight that our own views are partial, particularly if they afford some of us entitlements?

The fly in the ointment is getting individuals to see, across difference, that they *do* have a shared or common problem. The difficulty can be appreciated in the example of peer sexual harassment in the middle school. One has to work with both boys and girls to get them to see that their problem is a shared one of creating a safe public space. To begin with, there is enormous reluctance on the part of girls to even discuss the matters with boys because, as they aptly put it, “you have to have somebody to dance with.” Boys too are reluctant to engage in conversation; they feel their growing manhood is threatened. Sexual harassment of boys by boys triggers fears of being gay, and it is often done out of a fear of being gay. The point is they need something or someone to assist them in seeing that although the fears are different it is a shared problem they have — the public space is not safe for any of them for different, but importantly connected, reasons having to do with enforced norms of heterosexuality. But it takes a skilled educator to help the students see how their concerns might be connected.

The experienced educator may make all the difference in whether or not hegemonic patterns of interpretation might be disrupted rather than reinforced. It is easy to further entrench racism or sexism if educators cannot, or will not, help students see through the mystifications that accompany and are produced by structural inequalities.

For these reasons I am skeptical of what I will, too blithely, call the “throw-them-into-the-experience-and-watch-them-develop-the-requisite-attitudes approach.” Something more is necessary. I would like to contribute to Heather Voke’s project by offering two suggestions. First, let us reconsider the assumption that everyone needs to learn the same attitudes regardless of the group(s) to which the person belongs. Second, let us reconsider the assumption that students will best learn the requisite attitudes in the larger community.

People in different positions with respect to structured inequalities may have to work on developing different sets of attitudes to engage in communicative democracy. If we look at the attitudes Voke names with an eye to assessing their adequacy in assisting members of a privileged group communicating with members of a downwardly socially constituted group, we might make some modifications and additions. We do need to be aware that others have a perspective which cannot be assimilated to one’s own, but we should add an awareness that, in some cases, their perspective may also be set in opposition to one’s own *by others*. We do need an attitude of equal respect, a willingness to say everyone has a right to express their point of view, and all ought to listen, but *also* a recognition that some of us will be members of a group which has denied others the conditions that make it *possible* for them to have a point of view. We do need an attitude of openness to the possibility that one’s own point of view is partial and situated, that there is something to be learned from others perspectives. We *also* need awareness that something *painful* may have to be learned, something which requires us to acknowledge things we

struggle hard to *deny* about ourselves. Of course we see the need for an attitude of mutual accountability. But should it *also* be an attitude that allows for the possibility that some of us might be *more* accountable?

As well as modifications, I suggest some additional attitudes for our repertoire. What about an attitude of curiosity, one that might instigate inquiry into the relations that make entitlements possible and ask who is responsible for them? Some of us may need to practice what Laurence Thomas calls “moral deference,” an attitude of listening to earn the trust of someone oppressed by a group to which we belong.⁶

I turn now to my second suggestion which rests upon the belief that children and adolescents are more likely to learn desired attitudes if they are on the *receiving* end of such attitudes, particularly in their relations with adults. I urge that we take on issues-centered learning in the *school* communities we share with students. There are two reasons why I think the task in this context may be harder, but, oddly, they are also the reasons why we should pursue it here.

In most school contexts we have an easier time finding problems in which the students are invested, problems where they feel a stake in the outcome. The difficult part is that these sorts of problems tend to provoke more resistances, more obstacles to developing the desired attitudes, than when students are discussing someone else’s problems. Yet the more the resistances emerge, the better the chance of working with them. I underscore the point that transformative learning is more likely to occur in situations where we are invested.

Finally, I urge we promote the learning of the desired attitudes within the school community itself because otherwise there is the danger that we send students off to learn attitudes which we ourselves fail to practice in relation to them, or do not help them practice in relation with one another. It is important that we do not ask students to go out and learn in the community what we cannot or will not model in schools. At least it is important if we want to avoid hypocrisy.

1. Laurence Thomas, “Moral Deference,” *The Philosophical Forum* 24, nos. 1-3 (1992-93): 233-50

2. Iris Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

3. Laurence Thomas, “Moral Deference,” 238.

4. Nancy Lesko and Leslie Bloom, “The Haunting of Multicultural Epistemology,” in *Multicultural Curriculum*, ed. R. Mahalingham and Cameron McCarthy (New York: Routledge, 2000), 242-60.

5. *Ibid.*, 253.

6. Thomas, “Moral Deference,” 247.