

Taking Curiosity Cautiously

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First, I want to thank Lynn Sargent De Jonghe for her thought-provoking paper and especially for the engaging narrative about Daniel, a student who was always getting into trouble until he finally met teachers who didn't see his curiosity as acting out, but rather as a positive trait that could spark creative thinking and problem-solving. These later teachers, and De Jonghe herself, helped Daniel find a meaningful place in the school community by honoring his seemingly insatiable curiosity and encouraging him to put it to good use fixing broken equipment or figuring out the wiring in the school ceiling to bring a long-forgotten school bell back to life. However, beyond the story of Daniel, the larger purpose of De Jonghe's paper is to make a case for curiosity as "prior to, and embedded in, both deliberation and dissent"—as a democratic disposition, perhaps.¹ Then, towards the end of the paper, she brings us back to classroom practice by offering five key principles for encouraging curiosity in children.

As De Jonghe explains, curiosity has a complex history in disciplines ranging from philosophy to psychology to theology, and in the ancient myths of Icarus and Actaeon. Curiosity is seen as a virtue by some and a vice by others. It has led to great scientific and technological discoveries, but it has also played a significant role in environmental destruction, and during the so-called Age of Discovery, curiosity too often went hand in hand with conquest.² So, while there are many good reasons for taking up De Jonghe's argument for fostering curiosity as fundamental to democracy and democratic education, in what follows, I want to extend the conversation by raising a few concerns or cautions about curiosity as an educational aim. I will group these cautions in terms of curiosity about other people, curiosity about things and the more-than-human world, and curiosity about knowledge itself.

Regarding curiosity about other people, it might seem quite natural to want to learn more about other people, especially those who are different from us, but the risk is that such curiosity often ends up reinscribing existing power relations between the curious subject and the object of their curiosity.

For example, when an able-bodied person asks someone with a disability what happened to them, the object of curiosity is both othered and put on the spot. As health activist Jessica Gimeno puts it, “Disabled people are not museum exhibits. We don’t owe strangers and curious people our time and energy.”³³ And when racialized people are asked (as they are, often multiple times a day) “what” they are or where they “really” came from, the question has the effect, intended or not, of distancing the racialized person while doing nothing to dismantle race-based power relations. In a blog on racial curiosity Stephanie Wilson writes, “So, you may now be thinking, ‘what is ‘the right’ way to ask what a person’s racial make-up or identity is?’ Honestly, I think the best [thing to do] is not to ask at all. Ask yourself: is your curiosity to know where my family is from worth causing the level of discomfort I will feel being asked? The answer is almost certainly no.”³⁴

The second caution I want to raise has to do with curiosity about things and the more-than-human world. In the section of her paper on educational perspectives on curiosity, De Jonghe describes curiosity’s “rebellious, undisciplined quality,” which can serve as an antidote to institutional (whether church, school or societal) efforts to quash curiosity and creativity in order to create obedient, unquestioning, disciplined bodies and minds. However, the flip side of rebellious, undisciplined curiosity is that it may lead to unforeseen harmful consequences. I’m thinking here of visitors to ecological preserves whose curiosity leads them to ignore instructions to stay on the trail, and who, in venturing off-trail, may cause irreparable harm to vegetation, wildlife, and fragile ecosystems. Similarly, curious visitors to the prehistoric caves in Lascaux, France created so much damage in the first 20 years of their being open to the public that the site had to be closed. As of 2016, the caves have been made accessible again, but only virtually. Of course, I recognize that without curiosity, the caves may never have been rediscovered in modern times, and without curiosity we would not know about the essential interconnectedness and fragility of ecosystems. So, I am not at all saying that curiosity itself is harmful, nor that De Jonghe is advocating a rebellious, undisciplined kind of curiosity—in fact, supporting and refining children’s curiosity is central to her argument. But, in contrast to Nathan Myhrvold’s enthusiastic exhortation to “Find things out, find out,

find out! In flame your curiosity!”, I would argue that curiosity must always be tempered with respect for, and humility toward, the objects of our curiosity, whose purpose and value lie not in being means to human ends.

On a related note, the third concern I have is about our relationship to knowledge itself and the modernist assumption that we have a right to know what we want to know—and I admit this is a tricky thing in education. For example, in response to the 2015 Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action for education, schools in British Columbia are attempting to decolonize educational practices and the curriculum, and many classroom walls are adorned with a poster of the First Peoples Principles of Learning. The last principle reads: “Learning involves recognizing that some knowledge is sacred and only shared with permission and/or in certain situations.”⁵ At first glance, this apparent thwarting of learning by partially withholding knowledge seems to go against education itself. To take up De Jonghe’s analogy, for some educators, being denied access to this sacred knowledge is like an itch we are not allowed to scratch. But according to rhetorician Doris Sommer, we need to pay attention to our response to such “No Trespassing” signs in texts by marginalized others. Do we see them as barriers to be overcome in our quest to know what we want to know, or can we find a way to live with the resistance and rejection without requiring the other to submit to our desire to be welcomed into their lives?⁶ Perhaps pursuing the larger social, political, and moral aims of decolonization and reconciliation means that we (teachers and students alike) must learn to calm the itch of our own curiosity, respect the boundaries being put around certain knowledge, and tame what Derrida, Levinas and others characterize as the desire to know, consume, or otherwise master the other.

In closing, I want to point to a broader concern about the way curiosity has been taken up in education today. As De Jonghe explains, curiosity did not receive much attention in the traditional educational literature, even well into the mid-20th century. But it is now the opposite; educators are inundated with studies about the benefits of fostering curiosity and creativity. As Mario Di Paolantonio puts it,

Curiosity is almost always championed and promoted in education. Invoking the word has become synonymous with

learning itself. In particular, curiosity is thought to drive a form of learning that many assume to be necessary in the twenty-first century: a learning meant to produce creative and innovative individuals who can succeed in the constant flux of the new economy.⁷

I do not have space here to unpack Di Paolantonio's full argument, but his concern, which I share, is that the constant demand for students to "be always curious, innovative, nimble and open to discovery" comes at an emotional, existential and ethical cost: "Curiosity inclines us to approach the world as a 'project' or 'problem-solving activity'."⁸ In its hunger for novelty and answers, curiosity does not allow sufficient time for care or contemplation, or for sitting still and lingering with that which resists being known or solved or discovered.⁹ Of course, there is much more to be said about all this, but let me end here by thanking Lynn again for her most engaging paper, and for helping me think in new ways about curiosity and its role in democratic education.

REFERENCES

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2 Palace Green Library, Durham University, "Curiosity and Conquest," <https://stories.durham.ac.uk/curiosity-and-conquest/>

3 Jessica Gimeno, "Stop Asking Disabled People, 'What Happened to You?'" Fashionably Ill: Surviving Pain with Style and Humor, <https://jessicagimeno.com/stop-asking-disabled-people-what-happened-to-you/> I acknowledge that children asking the same question may or may not have the same effect, but Gimeno's post is referring to adults.

4 Stephanie Wilson, "'What are You?' My Experiences with Racial Curiosity, Categorization, and 'Othering'" Blog of Encompass Movement (blog), October 17, 2017, <https://encompassmovement.org/blog/experiences-racial-curiosity-categorization-othering>

5 First Nations Education Steering Committee, "First Peoples Principles of

Learning,” <http://www.fnesc.ca/first-peoples-principles-of-learning/>

6 Doris Sommer, “Resistant Texts and Incompetent Readers,” *Poetics Today* 15, no. 4 (1994): 523-551. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1773099>

7 Mario Di Paolantonio, “The Malaise of the Soul at Work: The Drive for Creativity, Self-actualization, and Curiosity in Education,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 38 (2019): 610-617. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-019-09653-4>

8 Di Paolantonio, 602, 612.

9 See also Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper Row, 1962), 216-217.