

Knowing and Reflecting in the Classroom: Prognosis Negative

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When I ask my students to write response papers, I often advise them to choose a reading they dislike. It is much easier, after all, to figure out a response if you really hate what the author had to say. The challenge in writing this response is simply that I agree almost completely with Deron Boyles.¹ His exposition of Dewey is clear, and his diagnosis—that North American schools are places where little reflection happens—is correct. As such, I can only offer an extension to Boyles’ argument, as well as some quibbling around the edges.

The first extension I will offer is an empirical one, and I will start with the following question: how prevalent, exactly, is the kind of classroom interaction that promotes reflection? I am sure that few of us are optimistic about this question, but as it turns out, research convincingly demonstrates that the answer is worse than we think. Martin Nystrand et al., in their article “Questions in Time,” observed patterns in classroom discourse in more than two hundred different eighth- and ninth-grade Midwestern social studies and English classrooms.² They were especially interested in the prevalence of a pattern that they called the “dialogic spell,” which they defined as “a mode of discourse, somewhere between recitation and discussion, characterized by engaged student questions and an absence of teacher test questions.”³ In other words, in a dialogic spell, the students and teachers were having genuine discussion about a question together—the teacher was not simply testing them to make sure that they understood the material correctly. Of the 1151 instructional episodes Nystrand et al. observed (an instructional episode being defined as a teacher teaching a particular topic), only 6.6% had even one dialogic spell, and only 11 instructional episodes (less than 1%) featured more than one of these dialogue patterns. In effect, the researchers found that even in relatively dialogue-friendly classes such as English and Social Studies, at a grade level where the achievement stakes are still relatively low, genuine dialogue is almost completely absent. We

can extrapolate that elsewhere in the system (science class, math class, higher grade levels), the situation is likely even worse.

Moreover, we know that many teachers are unlikely to break from this pattern. Teachers, like parents and citizens more generally, have a traditional conception of school—as sociologist Mary Metz pointed out, everyone has a script for what “real school” is, and this script is enacted, faithfully and less faithfully, in classrooms across North America.⁴ But even when it is enacted less faithfully—the students slack off, the class does not start on time, the curriculum is watered down—the overall pattern is the same. There is material to be learned, and teachers are going to teach it through monologue, scripted questions and answers, and homework. That is just what real teachers and students do, and as Metz notes, the ritual is reassuring, especially in schools that are mostly failing to educate their students, where adherence to the futile ritual takes on an especially fervent quality.

But despite the strength of this “real school” pattern, some teachers try to fight it. They want to engage in the kind of dialogue that is essential for the reflecting and knowing to which Dewey is so committed. But these teachers have an uphill battle in multiple ways: first, they have to struggle with a curriculum loaded with too much content, as well as regimes of standardized testing; second, they have to face potential parental disapproval of more progressive pedagogical strategies; and third, and perhaps most significantly, they face a polarized, chilled environment within which to discuss the kinds of questions that most engage students, which are difficult social questions.

To this last point, in the work I do with Bruce Maxwell and Kevin McDonough on “curricular academic freedom,” which we define as teachers’ latitude to explore topics freely within the bounds of the curriculum, we have indications that this freedom is hitting a new low. There are considerable legal obstacles to the exercise of this freedom; in the United States, teachers are considered by the courts to be “hired mouths” of the state and, as such, have no real legal grounds for classroom autonomy.⁵ When this precarious legal status is combined with an increasingly polarized environment and a lack of teacher tenure in many states, it is a perfect recipe for teacher caution. Boyles correctly

points out that teachers still have a certain amount of de facto latitude to express their views in the classroom. However, despite this, many teachers feel that this latitude is very limited. We recently conducted an initial survey of teachers from across North America to gauge their feelings about curricular academic freedom, and our respondents, on average, indicated that they had a low degree of curricular academic freedom. This was especially true for respondents in more conservative areas of the country.⁶

So much for my extension of Boyles' argument. I doubt that I am telling Boyles anything new here—he is already aware that promoting thoughtful, reflective classrooms is an uphill battle. My question for him concerns traditional epistemology—he comments, “In short, traditional epistemology and the entailing power structure that supports it may be largely to blame or the general lack of inquiry found within U.S. classrooms.”

I will come back to the question of the power structure, since I think that that is what is really at issue here. My concern here is that I do not see that knowing and reflecting is necessarily incompatible with traditional epistemology. Suppose that I am a good traditional history teacher. I am keen on the sort of thing that Boyles does not like—“order, discipline, and time on task”—and I actively dislike the kind of inquiry Boyles praises, which is “varied, serendipitous, and transactional.” For me, it is critical that my students acquire historical knowledge carefully and systematically. Furthermore, I think about that knowledge primarily in terms of a stock, which is the wrong way to think about it, according to Dewey's analysis. But despite thinking it is a stock, which is, after all, likely how most good teachers think of it, I know that acquiring the stock is difficult and requires activity, investment, and curiosity, both on my own part and that of the student. I therefore work hard to do what Dewey called, in “The Child and the Curriculum,” “psychologizing” the knowledge—contextualizing it and making it come alive for the student.⁷ Now, here Boyles might say that I am giving the game away, as I am admitting that the good traditional teacher tacitly emphasizes “knowing” and “reflecting” at the expense of a pure knowledge transmission approach. But the fact remains, I suspect, that these teachers would still give a “traditional epistemology” account of their own action.

To this point, Boyles also suggests that “classroom practices that specifically endorse warranted assertions would mean that students and teachers no longer search for or operate under the assumption of ‘the truth’ in Platonic, Kantian, or ‘Common Core’ curriculum terms.” But I really fail to see why this is the case, unless this endorsement is paired, as I will admit it sometimes is, with an unduly passive conception of learning. The fact is that even in these more traditional truth regimes (especially that of Plato), there are considerable resources that could underpin a commitment to actively knowing and reflecting about the world as a critical precondition to the acquisition of truth. Beyond this, one could also be committed to a notion of truth that specifically calls for action and reflection—for example, a Popperian regime of conjectures and refutations, which could be especially palatable for science teachers, who are already familiar with it. Finally, I will note that, even if we endorse a Deweyan conception, there is still a stock of what Noah Feinsein and I have called “pretty good knowledge” that students need to acquire.⁸ Of course, we agree with Boyles that this static stock conception of knowledge is secondary to knowing and reflecting, but it exists all the same, and teachers being oriented toward it is not the end of the world.

The more difficult matter is not so much traditional epistemology but, as Boyles correctly points out, the underlying conditions of American education. As David Blacker argues in *The Falling Rate of Learning and the Neoliberal Endgame*, neoliberalism just does not need that many well-educated people, and that number is getting lower all the time.⁹ In the 1960s, at least, there was a thought that we needed to raise the bar to compete with the Russians, and the thought that our system of education was somehow inadequate was a genuine preoccupation for policy makers. When Jerome Bruner, in *The Process of Education*, pleaded that the teacher should not just be a mouthpiece for the curriculum but rather a model of expert, active inquiry, he had a receptive audience.¹⁰

But things are different now. The function of schooling, which has always been largely custodial, is increasingly so. Teachers know it, and their poor pay, particularly in the United States, is entirely in accordance with this function. The practice of reflecting and knowing still has its adherents, both

among traditional and more progressive pedagogues, especially in places where student success still matters. But in many other places, real school dominates—no dialogue, no reflection, and not even the acquisition of a stock of knowledge. It's just a matter of going through the motions.

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