

Mediating Imitative Learning

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As Bryan Warnick suggests, imitative learning is ubiquitous and important. He ends by suggesting that we should examine the ways in which imitative learning is vital in sustaining practices, communities, and traditions — including the most self-consciously critical ones — over time, and he appeals to forms of inquiry that examine the “powers within social contexts that shape how imitation occurs, what it means, and what value it has in education.” Warnick’s contention is that, with respect to imitative learning, “the discourse so far has taken a much too individualistic view.” What we need is a kind of social analysis that “looks beyond the model and the observer” in order to recognize that “the imitative encounter is not simply an engagement between a learner and a model, as it has so often been taken to be.” To substantiate this claim, Warnick reports on “looking at the intellectual history of the topic...[which] helps flush out with greater clarity our current assumptions.” Warnick suggests that the passage from Homer he cites exemplifies, “a popular view of how imitative learning proceeds,” a way of thinking that has been “so fashionable” ever since that it can be considered “the standard model of thinking about human examples and imitation.”

The passage in question shows Athena in a rather narrowly didactic moment, one that exemplifies the assumptions of intentional exemplarity and consequential motivation. Viewed as a model of “how imitative learning proceeds,” as Warnick puts it, the situation depicted and its explicit concerns with intention and motivation seem limited and unhelpful, as he suggests. But, is that right? Thinking about this passage, I find myself wondering what it is that the standard model is a model of. Homer’s focus, after all, is on the efforts of Athena to encourage Telemachos to imitate Orestes. Athena attempts to provoke what she would see as a desirable instance of imitative learning. Following the passage in question, Warnick notes the teacher’s presence, commenting that, “Athena’s injunction reveals one model for how we teach and learn by observing others.” But even here it is fair to ask if the model is about the phenomenon of imitative learning at all — except insofar as such learning is the object of a teacher’s desire. Perhaps it is fair to say that what we have here is a model not of “how imitative learning proceeds,” but rather of how one might set out intentionally, driven by a desire that the prospective learner(s) might see some good presumed in their doing so, to prompt or foster such learning. The role played by Athena is that of mediator, a role constituted by the combination of intentional and motivational interests Warnick ascribes to the model. Viewed in this way, the assumptions are neither deficient nor surprising; Homer’s depiction of Athena’s efforts is an example of a much-discussed form of endeavor that is commonplace in education and social life more generally.

I am suggesting that, while Warnick is right to move beyond a preoccupation with the learner and exemplar, the standard model, to the extent its focus is upon

mediational activity, is not the problem. Warnick comments with regard to imitative learning, “we need to turn away from simply looking at the individual subjects and toward the practices, communities, and traditions in which the individuals are situated.” The standard model, as a model of attempts to mediate imitative learning, has a definite role in such contexts (notwithstanding the fact that much of the imitative learning that takes place in such domains is unmediated, not a matter of intentional efforts on anyone’s part). But, in addition, some efforts to mediate imitative learning extend beyond the confines of particular practices or well-defined communities, and these manifestations of the standard model are vitally, and perhaps increasingly, important as well.

Consider a pair of examples that I would place, alongside Athena, under a revised standard model. One involves a teacher, call him Al, intent on having his students embrace the life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr. He is convinced that, if they are moved by MLK, they will more likely notice and engage in ongoing struggles to achieve social justice. A second involves an advertising executive, Zeb, whose work, like that of many others Juliet Schor has recently depicted, is intent on tracking and portraying conceptions of “cool kids” for use in ad campaigns designed to encourage a vast audience of children to emulate them in the interests of being cool themselves, meanwhile becoming more likely to buy the associated products.¹

Let me suggest a number of contrasts between these instances of intentional efforts to mediate imitative learning. First, with respect to the mediator’s intention, there is the question of its transparency. On the one hand, embedded in a tradition of teaching, Al is forthright about what he intends. Zeb’s intentions are hidden.

Second, also with respect to intention, Al is accountable, answerable; if asked, he could give an honest accounting of his reasons and intentions to those he would wish to influence. Indeed, doing so might advance the intentions in question. That is clearly not the case with the Zeb’s intentions; he would surely prefer to avoid such an accounting, though in the nature of the case, that is not difficult to do.

Third, now with respect to the consequential motivation, the presumed good in question, there is a difference with respect to identity of interests. Al would have others learn from MLK’s exemplary life because he himself has done so; the potential good for them is similar in kind to the actual good he has known. It is possible that his own learning about MLK was unmediated, but, regardless of that, deciding to extend that good to others is an acknowledgment that it is in fact a good thing to be so moved. Zeb has no such interest in common. He is aware of the fact that a concern about being cool motivates his audience; he uses this fact in turn to advance his own entirely distinct interests, and those of his clients.

Fourth, the motivating impulse for Al is fundamentally inclusive. Those encouraged to attend to certain exemplars will, by doing so, be more likely to gain entry to the community that upholds, and may be partly constituted by, the exemplars in question, a community of which Al himself is part. Zeb’s motivation is exclusive; his purposes are not shared, and the domains in which the exemplar is situated, and the imitators live, are worlds apart; no amount of imitative learning will join the parties together in a common project or community.

Finally, there is a distinction centered on the learner's agency. Al would see the learner gain over time by way of what is learned imitatively a sense of agency in the practice or community that the exemplar represents; in this case, the struggle for social justice of which MLK's life is part. In this, there is the possibility, at least, of developing the kind of loving commitment that, as Harry Frankfurt has written, provides the basis for the most complete freedom it is possible to experience.² Zeb does best when those who succumb to the charms of selected exemplars are left vulnerable, off-balance, ready to be seduced by the next one, and the next. Genuine autonomy is the enemy of such efforts to foster imitative learning in a pseudo-community of shifting styles and evanescent role models.

Let me close with two brief points in the spirit of inquiry that Warnick recommends given the complexities of this topic. First, I do not mean to suggest by my examples that direct, face-to-face forms of mediation are necessarily more desirable than those embedded in popular media; I am sure examples cutting the other way could be given. Second, there are particularly fascinating interactive effects to explore as well. Orlando Patterson, for example, recently noted with alarm the way certain attitudes and postures exemplified by commercial rap music artists influence the way part of their audience, namely some urban black youth, tragically close themselves off to forms of community and educational practice, and to the potentially exemplary figures they might otherwise engage and learn from within them.³

In short, I think that Athena's efforts, limited as they are, may be seen as functionally equivalent to an extraordinary range of intentional efforts to provoke and prompt forms of imitative learning. The standard model, viewed in this way, is neither "too individualistic," nor detached from "the powers within social contexts that shape how imitation occurs" — however ham-fisted some would-be practitioners of the art of mediating imitative learning might be. Surely there are enough skillful ones to make this socially and educationally significant form of activity worthy of the closest scrutiny. As Warnick's work suggests, imitative learning is a vital phenomenon; that being so, we do well to extend the "standard model" so as to attend to the efforts of those who would mediate such experiences, their reasons and resources, their ends, ways, and impact on the lives they affect.

1. Juliet B. Schor, *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture* (New York: Scribner, 2004).

2. Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

3. Orlando Patterson, "A Poverty of the Mind," *New York Times*, March 26, 2006, section 4, 13.