Five Questions about Polarization: Response to Anderson

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Elizabeth Anderson's thoughtful paper, "Education for Democracy in an Age of Polarization," offers much to agree with, and many ideas to consider.[1] In my response, I pose a series of questions designed to open further conversation about some of the claims and suggestions raised by Anderson. I do so, in part, by highlighting work from some colleagues in philosophy of education. My goal, in this respect, is to facilitate a set of conversations between scholars in our Philosophy of Education Society community and our Kneller lecturer. I focus on five thematic questions: (1) issues of power and politics, (2) challenges of partisanship, (3) moral risks of indoctrination, (4) epistemic requirements for democratic education, and (5) pedagogic practice. In each area, I pose some areas for further conversation and inquiry.

First, a political question. Rachel Wahl has raised the question of whether focusing on democratic goals, which are primarily political goals, substitutes the moral goal of fighting for justice.[2] If we think about polarization as the main framework that informs our discussion, our goal might be, as Anderson suggests, to reconnect, to realign, to find trust and shared values, and to bridge divisions. That is, if we think *polarization* is the real issue, then these kinds of activities would be the natural solution. If, alternatively, our framework is one of *justice*, and if we understand this elusive concept as relating to broad but concrete goals such as equality, equal dignity, and the like, then we might want to ensure that these broader goals override competing demands. This contrast raises questions of trust. Anderson argues that educators might help students build understandings across difference, thereby working to repair social trust. Here, I wonder: does this trust need to be earned, or should it be assumed? In our current, polarized moment, should we frame the issue as a matter of polarization, which calls for mending and repairing, or should we rather think of the predicament as a moral struggle over values? Or possibly even as a political struggle over the power to impose certain values on others?

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Second, related to these issues of power, are challenges raised by bad faith actors. Anderson's paper concludes by invoking Dewey's "democratic faith . . . in the possibility of conducting disputes, controversies and conflicts as cooperative undertakings in which both parties learn by giving the other a chance to express itself."[3] Anderson draws on this Deweyan vision to encourage teachers to make room for the expression of diverse perspectives. This vision offers a common ground approach to pedagogical practice in polarized times, organizing practice within the boundaries of democratic aims by supporting the expression of diverse views from which "both parties" (or all parties) can learn. Such a goal, however, can be challenged by bad faith actors, particularly those who use power to pursue partisan goals. Consider, for example, bad faith on the part of advocates of free speech. Should we accept the framing of protecting free speech and academic freedom as a "common ground value" that all can align with, across ideological divides, even when attacks on academic freedom often advance partisan aims? Consider, for instance, that attacks on tenure, gender studies, and CRT are met with concern from progressives, and often with silence from conservatives, even as the latter highlight attacks on bigotted speech as undermining academic freedom. Consider how some of the same scholars who worry about the silencing of anti-racist voices find themselves advocating for the rejection of pro-Israel voices, while those who want to protect the speech rights of right-wing ideologues and provocateurs aims to silence pro-Palestinian voices. Principled positions too often crumble in the face of a disfavored view. Assuming that we can all agree on the ideals of open expression and academic freedom is not always justified.

A related issue also centers around neutrality and the purported risks of indoctrination. Here, concerns about indoctrination can risk displacing important moral aims of education. Joy Erickson and Winston Thompson have demonstrated how the goals of education shift when we allow for "an unchecked apprehension of indoctrination." They explain this concern:

> Appeals to a public standard of neutrality in education are often attached to worries that students are being denied an appropriately neutral education, the purported consequence

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> of which is that students might be indoctrinated into specific contentious worldviews. Indeed, these concerns, echoed and amplified in and across various socio-political factions, have an enduring presence within the orbit of various educational projects. Perhaps chief amongst those pedagogical endeavours likely to engender this disquiet are those that are directive in identifying and/or expressing normative values in the service of political or moral ends, especially when these are popularly perceived as contentious.[4]

Worries about neutrality can be overblown, jeopardizing important normative aims for education. Here, certain philosophers of education have framed civic education as a sub-category of moral education, which loses its strength when charges of indoctrination push it in the direction of neutrality.[5] The charge of indoctrination seems to continuously expand. For example, not only is teaching about white privilege depicted as divisive, as Anderson notes in her paper, but so is drawing on the 1619 project, or learning about intersectionality in an AP African American studies course. Even further, claims of indoctrination now follow choices to read a book about Roberto Clemente or Rosa Parks, to include social emotional learning goals in a lesson, or to say anything at all about gender or sexuality. In this reductive thinking, almost any ideas can be potentially dangerous influences, and present opportunities for teachers to take advantage of young people. While extreme, these tensions also suggest a question for Anderson's focus on free expression in the classroom. Building on these concerns, it is important to consider whether finding a space that is free of indoctrination is possible and desirable for an educator committed to a Deweyan approach.

Fourth, democratic education aims not only to build civic capacity and civic friendship, but also to further true knowledge about history and the state of the world. But here, polarization can build mistrust about what counts as knowledge. Hannah Arendt, who was by far less optimistic than Dewey, notes some of these concerns in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*:

> Before they seize power and establish a world according to

> their doctrines, totalitarian movements conjure up a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself; in which, through sheer imagination, uprooted masses can feel at home and are spared the never-ending shocks which real life and real experiences deal to human beings and their expectations.[6]

Concerns about epistemology are woven into the mistrust that polarization engenders. As Anderson details in her paper, ideological divides lead to assumptions about people on the other side being not only close-minded or lazy, but also thinking of them as unintelligent. On each side of the divide, partisans see the out-group as relying on unfounded perceptions of reality. This is a problem for democratic educators. Encouraging a commitment to truth, to justified beliefs, or, at the very least, to a critical assessment of facts, is a necessary component of a comprehensive democratic education. Without it, people turn from citizens to subjects, and they are prone to accepting the lying world that authoritarian politicians build for them. These concerns lead to two questions for Anderson, one general and one specific. Generally, how might we understand the role of truth claims in democratic pedagogical practice? More specifically, and potentially more challenging, how should we think about personal experience, including personal identity, within the epistemological context of democratic education? As Lauren Bialystok has asked, what kind of knowledge comes from identity?[7] One of the more contentious dimensions of this debate involves the place of identity claims, personal reports about harm, and positionality statements. Attempts to prevent harm sometimes chill speech; attempts to avoid harming another person sometimes lead students and instructors to stay silent or to avoid a topic altogether. The power of identity claims within this context can seem overwhelming, for instance, consider statements like, "as a woman, I am saying x," or "as an immigrant, I reject your claim." Given this context, I wonder how Anderson thinks about the types of evidence that might be acceptable within a democratic pedagogical practice. How do we know when to make room for identity in a discussion about education for democracy?

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Finally, and relatedly, I want to raise another question of pedagogic practice. Anderson argues that "education for democracy should not aim at producing or avoiding particular feelings in students, but at developing skills of respectful interaction across difference." In effect, in Anderson's framing, teachers should not work to ensure that students don't feel bad, and they should also not require that they feel bad. Her analysis focuses on matters of race: white students should not be required to feel guilt or anguish about their race, nor should they be actively protected from uncomfortable feelings that might arise from the accurate teaching of American history. Here, it seems like the teacher can either put aside affective matters or they can respond to emotions that come up in the context of class, but they should neither promote nor circumvent them. Yet, in the context of a classroom, attending to emotions is sometimes necessary for accomplishing a pedagogical goal. Some accounts of patriotism depend on a "love of country," for example. But closer to our discussion, affective responses are also central to Anderson's democratic project, and her concerns about affective polarization and ideological contempt. To renew democracy, we need to counter perceptions that our fellow citizens are unintelligent, close minded, or lazy. Yet, how might these affective stances be proactively responded to, harnessed, or otherwise addressed in class? Indeed, feelings are central to democracy: being proud of who you are; being appreciative of diverse others, their experiences, and perspectives; and developing a sense of trust in others. Should these affective stances be proactively cultivated, or otherwise addressed in class?

These questions arise in the context of engaging with the thoughtful ideas developed by Anderson in her Kneller lecture. They in no way detract from the substance of Anderson's call for democratic education in polarized times, but rather they are aimed at underscoring the complexity of this difficult yet crucial normative and pedagogical work.

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6 Hannah Arendt, *The origins of totalitarianism* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973), 353.

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