

The Philosophy of Education

2 September The Philosophy of Education - Caroline Brem

Caroline Brem discussed the philosophy of education drawing from the works of Ivan Illich who told us clearly that education and schooling were two very different disciplines.

My definition of a teacher is not someone with the right bits of paper but the one who can dismantle a 'package' or process and then rebuild it step by step while making sure that the 'student' is understanding not only how to do each step, but also the rationale for performance of each step. It makes little difference to this process whether the 'package' contains instructions for 'how to knit' or 'English as a foreign language', students have been indoctrinated to believe that the person giving the instruction needs to have some qualifications, some certification to 'prove' they are teachers.

Now, you have to understand that I spent just about 20 years 'teaching' without any such accreditation, and then another 20 or so teaching with a collection of so-called qualifications. I am convinced that I was a better teacher before all the brouhaha of lectures (packages of information about very narrow areas of expertise). When I began to 'study' at uni I discovered that teaching is not about telling the students what to do, but finding out how they think, how they assimilate information and how they connect what they are learning to the things they already know. But more than that, this was the era when knowledge and information were being turned into commodities which could be 'consumed'. So even though we were studying the 'how' there was only a small area of interface between the 'how' and the 'what' of learning. And everyone — lecturers and students — took it all so seriously. I strongly agree with Einstein that education should be fun rather than forced — that force and punishment play no part in a good education. Thus I detest the practice of punishing students for not doing their homework.

Arriving at uni, I started reading more esoteric literature: Plato, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Mencken, and eventually, Marx and then Illich. I came to Illich with surprise: his voice was clear and his theories and ideas confronting. But the more I thought about it and the more I came into contact with learners, the more interested I became in adult learning theory — the how and what we recall and process when we learn. I began to see how deeply embedded the school regime was in the self-image of students qua learners. Students in my early classes trotted out as factual, information such as 'I'm a hopeless student'; 'I can't concentrate.' And 'I don't have a creative bone in my body.' This last from a man in his late 50s who, a year after the end of the creative writing class, sent me a copy of his first newly-published book, put out by a well-known publisher. I love it when my students succeed: that's why I'm still teaching. I'm still teaching because every time I meet with students I learn something new. Mencken, quoting Nietzsche, tells us 'The educated man is one who knows a great deal more than the average man and is constantly increasing his area of knowledge in a sensible, orderly, logical fashion.' 'Such,' says Mencken is the purpose of education in its ideal aspect.' He goes on to say 'the science of teaching, when observed in actual practice, often fails utterly to attain this end.' 'The well-schooled person, instead of being led into habits of independent thinking, is trained to accept authority. Almost 30 years ago I read a couple of papers on the deschooling of society. I tied them up, in my tiny mind, with Marx's observation that schools only teach 3 things: obedience, punctuality and perseverance.

Now, I have no problems with these habits, but they should not be the only, or even the main attributes presented and policed in the school system. Creative drive is knocked out of children, with very few exceptions, by their third or fourth year in the system. By this time young children begin to learn that self-initiated activity is demeaned into an extracurricular pastime – something to be done after school or after work and of no real value except as an outlet for idiosyncrasy. What disturbs me is that in order to build a new system we have first to dismantle the current structure. Using the analogy of a block of land on which there stands a large building filled with both people and artifacts, how would we go about making the most radical of changes? What we want is an edifice as different from the original as to be completely unrecognizable by the previous occupants. Not only the physical structure but also the ephemeral processes and products must be reconstructed without, or with very little, reference to yesterday's model. Unless we insist on going to the root of schooling – the transformation of knowledge into a commodity – we run the risk of accepting solutions which will aggravate the contemporary educational crisis.

Some critics want to push the walls of the classroom to the borders of culture. They propose to transform everyday life into an enterprise under the management of teachers who channel knowledge to co-operant consumers. Others conceive of modern culture as a therapeutic institution and of the educator as a therapist on whose professional services every member of society will have to depend. Such ‘solutions’ will only increase psychological addiction to the consumption of learning.

The change put forward by Illich is that institutions must be based on the recognition that knowledge is not a commodity, but a concrete unrepeatable and surprising part of a man's life. Knowledge is a person's understanding of the context into which he places the information which surrounds him. It is his insight into the meaning this context has for him. It is the wisdom which relates him to his community. Knowledge thus understood as an existential life-experience, is learning, and this learning is the goal of education. One of the first problems to be dealt with must be the deconstruction of childhood as a condition. Instead of child labour, we should think of this portion of society as young but not in need of instruction: they learn without any structure for the first four or five years. What they learn depends on the environment. This is the nature/nurture debate. They learn basic survival skills which will see them through life's ups and downs. If they belong to the first world countries they will get through this period with little or no difficulty. Perhaps, to sidetrack a bit, we need to note that what happens at this very early stage is highly dependent on the culture of the society the child is born into. This then also assumes that judgment needs to be suspended.

No one of us has the “right” to criticize another's culture. It seems arrogant in the extreme to believe that one's own culture is the “true”, “real” “universal” or any other similar word, while the other culture is “barbaric”, “savage” or “uncivilized”. How can we ever be truly sure of this? Surely the mere fact that the species has survived into the present era is evidence that they learnt to survive – and be happy/satisfied with their lifestyle. Kath Walker's poem about the “white man's food” which the aboriginals received in rations and threw away whilst they still knew how to hunt and gather for themselves, and the culture which arrived, smug in their own righteous superiority and importance, bringing with them vermin, alcohol and diseases previously unknown among these people, is just one in a litany of similar disenfranchisements around the globe. So, to go back to our rebuilding project: what to do with the 5 to 7 year corpus of the society? In “primitive” societies this group is already useful and productive. Now, we need to understand that the next step has to come from the society as well as from the primary caregiver(s). At this stage they are little people with immense appetites for learning. But what they learn will stay with them for life – just ask the Jesuits: they worked it out – and milked it – years ago. Education becomes mystified by a society which has been schooled by educators who see knowledge as a commodity which can be parceled into discrete “topics”, “subjects” or “courses”. One example of the effect this has is the teaching of “geography” and “history” as subjects with no connection one to the other. Just as language carries culture, so other subjects have intrinsic relationships.

The sad thing is that all young people in “first world” countries have been put into the sausage machine and the homogenous workers, with a “good work ethic” come out at the end, knowing which sausages are best, and which have something missing. The first sausages to come out of the machine are those who have consumed

the least amount of courses or education and will, with very few exceptions, fill the lower ramparts of ‘society as a construct’. These are the people who will spend their lives hanging on to dreams the society will always keep just a little out of reach. Close enough to be seen and sufficiently distant to ensure that the work goes on; the wheels of production and consumerism will keep turning. Much of what the lower strata aspire to are now being produced in huge numbers as cheap imitations within the monetary reach of the poorly-paid majority of the populace.

Childhood, as a temporal measure, defined by dependence on either parents or the education system, has, by the end of the 20th century, been stretched to the interesting length of approximately 25 years. This, at the most optimistic, would represent a quarter of a life time. Or at current life expectancy almost one third. During this period we expect very little in the way of ‘production’ from this sector. What we do expect is that they become prolific consumers. And, of course, they do. Apart from all the material consumption, there are also the parcels of education they consume in the vague hope that this ‘knowledge/information’ they are imbibing will mean more goods and services available to them later.

If we now revert to the 5 to 7 age group one more time, this is probably the most auspicious age at which to teach the two subjects which society qua educator would have some difficulty with. The two subjects are ‘literacy’ and ‘numeracy’. it will be a shorter course because it will be about ‘how’ rather than ‘what’. We can offer the young person instruction in an ad hoc way. It need not be a time/place/method oriented course, but rather instructors available in a wide variety of times and places, using a variety of methods. The rationale for this system is that the young student will decide for him or herself when, where and how they would like to learn to read and write and work with numbers. When the student is willing and motivated the learning happens at an amazing speed. And if the method of instruction is interesting and student-oriented the student will be much more interested in learning more. But also of great importance is to teach students ‘how to learn’ rather than give them parcels of information, packaged by “experts” in some ivory tower.

The trouble with these ideas is that we would be taking away much of the “power” the system has. The teachers who understand the power imbued in them by the system, allowing them to give or withhold the certification needed are few. At present power comes to the students who have ‘consumed’ a sufficient number of the appropriate “packages” of information. For the students who go through their entire schooling ‘doing the right things’, getting to the Holy Grail of graduation is only a matter of “ticking the boxes” on an education to-do list. Not much room here for creative thinking or experimentation. But what we have taught our young people – and taught it very well – is that the only legitimate way to learn anything of value is from an accredited teacher, in an accredited institution, in bite-size packages.