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## Epistemic Authority: A Reply to Suzanne de Castell

In her paper, "Epistemic Authority, Institutional Power and Curriculum Knowledge", Professor de Castell offers four theses.

- A. The authority of teachers is legitimate only if those teachers have superior knowledge in (a) a discipline (b) methods of teaching (c) the psychology of learning. To be *in* authority requires being *an* authority. Without these epistemic credentials the exercise of authority is arbitrary, hence illegitimate.
- B. In practice in schools, (some, many, most)† teachers do not have the epistemic credentials, therefore (in those cases) the exercise of authority is arbitrary, hence illegitimate.
- C. The lack of epistemic credentials in (those) teachers (partly) explains why (some, many, most) students are unwilling to accept the authority of (those, all) teachers.
- D. Students are justified in rejecting the authority of (those) teachers who do not have the epistemic credentials.

In my view, the thrust of A is correct, but A is too strong as it is stated. Thesis B is, I believe, incorrect. If B is mistaken, then so are C and D. Since space is limited and since A and B underpin C and D, I will concentrate on A and B.

### Thesis A

Professor de Castell re-issues an argument by R.S. Peters: teachers have a right to authority in classrooms only if they have superior knowledge of what ought to be taught, when and how. A teacher can be *in* authority only if *an* authority. Entitlement stems from the presumption that human action ought, on balance, to be rational; since teachers have, and can transmit, that knowledge, which is the stuffing of rational thought, they ought to be in authority.

If education, not just as an ideal but as it is practised, has basically to do with helping people to gain some measure of sophisticated understanding of, and proficiency in the activities within, an intellectual and cultural heritage, then it is hard to see how the exercise of authority can avoid being centrally placed with regard to the knowledge of this intellectual tradition and the means of passing it on to others. So, basically I agree with de Castell/Peters.

However, the thesis is not home free. For it seems to claim that subject, method and psychological knowledge is (a) conjointly required to legitimize authority and (b) required in each and every case where authority is legitimately claimed. First, it is not obvious that we would refuse authority to a teacher who was very knowledgeable in a subject but knew little about teaching methods or child psychology. If this teacher had a charismatic personality or had particularly attentive students, wonderful learning situations might arise despite the other 'epistemic deficiencies'. Second, authority might be justified by appeal to principles *intrinsic* to educating other than subject, method

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†The words in parentheses are included, not because de Castell uses them, but to indicate that her position is unclear.

and psychological knowledge. A teacher might, for instance, possess superior ability to motivate students to learn and be able, as well, to organize varied educational experiences such as field trips, guest speakers, and individual study, all of which would bring about the desired learning. Surely we would not deny authority in an isolated case such as this? After all, the point to granting authority is that by so doing, desired learning will take place. Third, a teacher might be granted authority on grounds *extrinsic* to educating. Consider a teacher whose subject specialization is being phased out of a school and who would face unemployment as a result. If this teacher had a large family and little prospect of other employment, could we not grant title to authority on grounds of compassion? What about a teacher who is two years from retirement and who, if made redundant, would lose his pension? Appeals to moral principles to justify authority can be made more plausible if we presume, in addition, that such cases are exceptions and that most other teachers are epistemically qualified. Fourth, some sociologists contend that schooling is, whether by design or effect, an exercise in engendering social and political conformity. Conservative educators sometimes argue that this is at least one aim of education. If so, the authority of those teachers who do the socializing could be justified by appeal to qualities relating to proficiency in socializing rather than the other epistemic qualities.

Although I, myself, would hesitate to support the fourth case, each of the arguments goes some way toward showing that epistemic credentials are not always needed for legitimate authority, and the first argument demonstrates that not all of the epistemic credentials would be necessary. These lines of attack can damage the overall de Castell position because her view is that (some, many) students are entitled to reject the authority of teachers who lack the epistemic credentials. However, if the teachers who are being rejected are those whose authority can be justified by other means, the de Castell position fails.

### Thesis B

In this thesis de Castell disputes the notion that (many, most) teachers have adequate epistemic credentials.

Normally, when we appeal to *an* authority for guidance four (uncontroversial, I believe) conditions must be met.

1. There must be some *body of knowledge* in which to be an authority. For instance, palmistry and astrology are not bodies of 'knowledge' because they lack objective evidence.
2. An authority must have *superior knowledge in the area in which authority is being claimed*. For example, superior historical knowledge makes one an authority in history, but not in, say, physics.
3. If the body of knowledge in which authority is claimed is *segmented* into conflicting schools of thought, claims to authority must be made relative to one of the schools. We should, for instance, object if a Freudian psychologist claims to be an authority in psychology *tout court*.
4. An authority must not have a *vested interest* in the use to which his pronouncements are being put. He must be seen to be *objective*. For example, a doctor would not be a satisfactory 'expert witness' at his own malpractice trial — or his brother's, or his best friend's.

De Castell's case is based upon violations of conditions 1 and 2. First, (sometimes, often) teachers are obliged to teach outside of their specializations — for example, a physics teacher teaching English. Second, an economics teacher, for example, might teach economic theory to an advanced streamed class, but with the bottom streamed class drift into a watered-down version which deals with practical advice giving on how to manage one's financial affairs and contend with the economic world, for example labour unions, salary differentials between men and women, and so forth. Supposedly, the teacher is qualified to teach economic theory but not give practical advice.

Therefore, with (some) students legitimate authority eases its way into the exercise of power because the epistemic justification for authority evaporates as the teacher moves out of the discipline.

The first position above entails a violation of my condition 2. In some instances this violation is *explained* by staff shortages or attempts to redeploy teachers who otherwise would be put out of work. *Justification* for authority, in some cases, might be attempted on non-epistemic grounds as discussed earlier. Nevertheless, de Castell's point is well taken. There are certainly unqualified teachers in some classrooms. How serious a problem this is for schooling in Canada is dependent upon how often this occurs. De Castell does not comment.

The second view points to violations of both of my conditions 1 and 2. Practical economic advice is not a body of knowledge. (condition 1). An economist who, *qua* economist, gives practical advice is trying to exercise epistemic authority outside of her field (condition 2). It is not hard to imagine classroom violations of both conditions. But does de Castell's economics teacher violate the conditions? Do teachers often violate them?

No, to both questions. First, economics as a subject does more than just develop theoretical postulates. It utilizes them in recommending policy and decision making. The great economist J.M. Keynes gave practical advice, as an economist, to the British delegation at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. In government, banking and industry it is the job of many economists to give practical advice and to carry it out. Home economists give practical advice on nutrition while acting in a professional capacity. It is not at all clear to me that applied economics is any less 'economics' than theoretical economics. So, discussion of day to day economic matters would not, *per se*, violate condition 1. Second, de Castell intimates, but does not demonstrate, that epistemic incompetence pervades Canadian schooling. Certainly the level of teacher preparation has improved dramatically over the past thirty years and now includes, in most provinces, a university degree and teacher training. Abuses and exceptions occur, surely, but relative to the knowledge of the students and the level of scholarly sophistication needed in elementary and secondary schools, a much stronger case must be made than de Castell offers.

I believe that de Castell could have argued a better case in support of her programme had she looked at the way in which teachers can violate conditions 3 and 4. For instance, to continue with economics, regarding condition 3, notions of how inflation out to be attacked come from monetarists, supply-siders and neo-Keynesians. The extreme versions of these schools are irreconcilable. What one affirms, the others deny. Contrast these views with Marxist economics! If educational authority is justified by knowledge because knowledge is a prerequisite of rational action, and if competing schools of thought generate conflicting proposals for rational action, it is hard to see how authoritative pronouncements can yield both rational and non rational proposals and still be seen as entitlement for authority. In addition, with reference to condition 4, there is a high probability that authorities from one school of thought will not be objective in assessing the recommendations of authorities from other schools. The Marxist school teacher is not likely to teach supply-side economics with much enthusiasm! In sum, one might reasonably question why the guidance of an authority at the head of the class ought to be followed, especially if one's sympathies lie with a rival school of thought.

Epistemic authority can be defended against these charges, in my view. It would, however, require a paper in itself.

### *Theses C and D*

Thesis C is an untested empirical hypothesis which suggests that (some, many) students become frustrated by teachers who cannot or will not teach a discipline proper rather than the emasculated

versions. But, if students were not given instruction in the discipline proper it is difficult to see how they would have grounds for objection. How would they know what they were missing.?

Thesis D seeks to justify student defiance of authority on grounds that the students are being deprived of the rational basis for making judgements in the various disciplines. But this view assumes that the students, who have been removed from the academic stream because of a judged inability to understand or otherwise benefit from it, are in fact capable or would otherwise benefit. Further, the implication seems to be that streaming is bad and/or that the teachers who select students for the various streams are either incompetent, politically motivated (to repress students, say, from a particular social class), or both. These assumptions are questionable and require some sort of defence. De Castell, however, offers nothing

Each of Professor de Castell's four theses merits a more complete critique than has been possible to provide here. I have concentrated on the first two because if successfully challenged they undercut the others. My hope, however, is that Professor de Castell continues her work in this area. For, although her programme must contend with objections of the sort I raised, nothing I have said devastates that programme.