The Move to a Pluralistic
Political Vision of Education

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ABSTRACT: Democratic pluralism requires individuals who can evaluate the groups with which they are associated and critically examine the identity that these groups help them to develop. The importance of creating institutions that do not socialize their members based upon epistemological systems that assert certainty and validity for one specific world-view coincides with the demands of pluralist democracy. Education plays a vital role in the facilitation of this type of critique and identity formation. Being able to critique our individual and group identities is crucial to the democratic mission. Shifting to an educational paradigm that prioritizes the democratic mission and the demands of a pluralist society is essential to the well-being of society. A hermeneutic paradigm provides the necessary shift in perspective and foundation. The discussion presented attempts to demonstrate the potentiality of this paradigm shift for transforming education within a pluralist democracy.

RÉSUMÉ: Dans le pluralisme démocratique, les individus doivent évaluer les groupes dans lesquels ils évoluent et examiner d'un oeil critique l'identité qu'ils leurs procurent. Il est important de créer des établissements qui n'identifient pas leurs membres avec une image épistémologique qui fait valoir la certitude et la justesse sur un point de vue international bien spécifique répondant aux demandes de la démocratie pluraliste. L'Education facilite considérablement la création de telles critique et identité. Dans nos objectifs démocratiques, il est primordial de pouvoir critiquer l'identité de l'individu et celle du groupe, et pour le bien-être de la société, de passer vers un paradigme pédagogique qui met l'accent sur l'aspiration démocratique et les besoins d'une société pluraliste. Un paradigme herméneutique apporte le changement et les bases jugés nécessaires. Le papier présente les tentatives qui prouvent l'efficacité du changement de ce paradigme, pour façonner une Education au sein d'une démocratie pluraliste.

Current concerns within society and the political leadership over the state of education, concerns generated by standardized testing and reflected in legislation like the *No Child Left Behind Act* (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), emphasize several important questions. What is the purpose of education within society, the economy, and political system? Upon what foundation do we base the assertion of this purpose? And, how do we assess the successful achievement of that purpose? The way in which educators answer these questions reveals the paradigm through which education functions. Educational institutions currently function within an epistemological paradigm that is contrary to the democratic objectives of a pluralist society. A shift to a hermeneutic paradigm represents an opportunity to realign educational institutions with the demands of pluralism. This discussion has deep roots within the western philosophic tradition. The debate between Platonic idealism and Aristotelian realism can be viewed as an early precursor to the current conflict that is brewing around the educational paradigm. Within the present paradigm, schools are faced with the dilemma of structuring their curriculum in such a way as to address current, and many times local, demands or to structure their curriculum to address a plan for the future. In either case, there is certainty attributed to an epistemological foundation. A consideration of the consequences of this attribution is necessary.

Beginning with a discussion of the purpose of education offers some insight into the dilemma. Do we want students to know or to understand? Is there a difference between these two objectives? Simply stated, *knowledge* corresponds to a paradigm founded upon epistemology: educational institutions seek to determine what is Truth and to transfer that Truth to their students. Educators are validated when their students successfully reproduce the knowledge they have been exposed to in their classrooms. *Understanding* corresponds to a paradigm founded within hermeneutics: educational institutions seek to discover how truth is determined and collaborate with their students to construct consensus. This debate focuses upon the consequent institutional characteristics that result when an epistemological foundation is sought to give validity to a specific paradigm or version of the Truth. As modern philosophy has progressed, the dynamic relationship that exists between objectives founded upon epistemology and objectives founded upon hermeneutics has been essential to the determination of educational institutions.

Knowledge, intuitively, is not a concept that is easily abandoned. The argument that $2 + 2 = 4$ is something that an individual knows and is not something simply understood is persuasive. Ludwig Wittgenstein helps to clarify the argument against the intuitive acceptance of knowledge. In *On Certainty* (1969), Wittgenstein asserts:

> My "mental state," the "knowing," gives me no guarantee of what will happen. But it consists in this, that I should not understand where a doubt could get a foothold nor where a further test was possible. One might say: "I know" expresses comfortable certainty, not the certainty that is still struggling. (1969, p. 46e)

Items that are asserted as things we know fall within a system upon which a degree of faith has been placed so as to confer a degree of certainty.

Certainty, within an epistemological framework, serves as a foundation or validation of knowledge. The difficulty arises when certainty is asserted to be absolute and becomes the criteria for the validation of all other frameworks. The search for certainty that modern philosophy represents has come under investigation as the validating evidence of the epistemological tradition has been questioned and problematized. The post-modern movement represents an attempt to break from the paradigm of modernity that has been dominated by the search for a foundation for Truth.

Alternatives to this epistemological foundation paradigm can be seen in differing post-modern philosophical positions. The encounter between Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jacques Derrida represents one of the most informative events in this debate involving alternative paradigms (Michelfelder & Palmer, 1989). Hermeneutics and deconstruction assert that understanding is the best that humankind can hope to achieve in their relationship to the world. Meaning is a potentiality that is negotiated, while Truth remains uncertain. The modern objective of validation is bracketed as certainty becomes problematic. Hermeneutics asserts that we base understanding upon communicative interactions that we seek to create agreement, or meaning. Understanding is a negotiated consensus among empowered agents within a dialogue. Deconstructionists such as Derrida maintain that humankind can only uncover the underlying assumptions of any belief system or epistemology; there is no foundation or certain knowledge to discover. Even the possibility of uncovering underlying assumptions does not promise the development of understanding for the deconstructionists. Both of these post-modernist traditions share a desire to overcome the

modernist reliance upon foundational knowledge. It is the desire to overcome, or bracket, a dependence upon certainty that represents the motivation to shift paradigms within education.

Hans-Georg Gadamer emphasizes the need to utilize the hermeneutic methodology over the method of deconstruction. Within the institutions of education, the ability to communicate efficiently makes all the difference in one's success or limitation as either a teacher or a student. Gadamer helps to illustrate the significance of this observation:

> The dialogical character of language, which I tried to work out, leaves behind it any starting point in the subjectivity of the subject, and especially in the meaning-directed intentions of the speaker. What we find happening in speaking is not a mere reification of intended meaning, but an endeavor that continually modifies itself, or better: a continually recurring temptation to engage oneself in something or to become involved with someone. (cited in Michelfelder & Palmer, 1989, p. 26)

This involvement in the processes of creating meaning through conversation or interpretation is crucial to learning, and, significantly so within a democracy. Involvement by the person seeking to understand seems to be a key objective of all education. The student must become an agent in the process. Hermeneutics requires that the stakeholders be engaged agents in the process of constructing understanding.

Before moving to discuss the potential paradigm shift within education, the nature of hermeneutics should be examined and explained further for those who may be less familiar with this methodology. The key image within this discussion is the "hermeneutic cycle." This cycle is dialectic between a text and an interpretation of that text. Meaning, within the dialectic, is inter-causal – it affects the text and the interpretation of the text. Meaning arises within the tension between experience and our interpretation of that experience. Kelly Ross offers a good explanation of the hermeneutic cycle:

> The "hermeneutic cycle" is the process by which we return to a text, or to the world, and derive a new interpretation – perhaps a new interpretation every time, or a new one for every interpreter. It is clear that this happens all the time. We can understand a book, a movie, etc. a little differently each time we read or see it. (2002, p. 2)

As we experience the world – whether as a text, a conversation, social setting, or any number (possibly an infinite number) of contexts – we participate in a hermeneutic activity of meaning explication. The

dialectic between experience and understanding is interpretive and requires that individuals become agents within the process.

Mis-understanding can result when the text or experience is interpreted outside of a context. Mis-understanding is a social or communal event. It occurs in relation to other, sometimes previous, interpretations. Martin Heidegger demonstrates this assertion:

> In the mere encountering of something, it is understood in terms of a totality of involvements; and such seeing hides in itself the explicitness of the assignment-relations (of the "in-order-to") which belongs to that totality. That which is understood gets Articulated when the entity to be understood is brought close interpretively by taking as our clue the "something as something;" and this Articulation lies before our making any thematic assertion about it. In such an assertion the "as" does not turn up for the first time; it just gets expressed for the first time, and this is possible only in that it lies before us as something expressible. (1927/1962, pp. 189-190)

Mis-understanding becomes an instance of articulating something in such a way that the totality of involvements is mis-represented. The interpretation of a text or object must take into account this totality of involvements. Hermeneutics offers a paradigm through which the totality of involvements of a text or object can be addressed, or at least acknowledged.

Communicative interaction becomes the model that informs the process of creating agency within the hermeneutic cycle. A hermeneutic paradigm based upon communicative interaction, or communicative reason, provides a significant alternative to the modernist, epistemological position. Jurgen Habermas states the importance of this proposed turn:

> This communicative rationality recalls older ideas of logos, inasmuch as it brings along with it the connotation of a noncoercively unifying, consensus-building force of a discourse in which the participants overcome their at first subjectively biased views in favor of a rationally motivated agreement. Communicative reason is expressed in a decentered understanding of the world. (1987, p. 315)

Shifting from a search for certainty in the foundation of knowledge to a search for agency within the hermeneutic cycle represents the potential paradigm shift that faces education.

Epistemological paradigms seek validation in the form of what are essentially tautological observations. *No Child Left Behind* (United States Department of Education, 2002) asserts an achievement gap in the knowledge of American students. This gap is expressed in terms of international comparisons and as features of ethnic, socio-economic, and gender comparisons. Standardized test scores are cited as evidence of this gap. The effectiveness of these sources of data and "evidence" will be discussed below. However, it is important to indicate that test scores become the source of validation for the entire paradigm.

Hermeneutics offers an alternative set of objectives that do not seek validation in this manner. The hermeneutic objectives cannot be assessed using the methodology of epistemology. It is useful to begin where there is some pre-existing common ground. Education in pluralist democracies has sought to further the demands of democratic society. As David Steiner explains:

> The capacity to create and re-create identity, to negotiate and renegotiate its components in a social setting, to judge the merits of public choices as they intersect with self-understanding and social needs, to engage in aesthetic experience and to develop intellectual habits equal to the task of discriminating among inescapably incommensurable demands; these capacities constitute the ends of a democratic education. (1994, p. 13)

Steiner's assertion of the ends of democratic education give us a starting point from which to examine the type of school that facilitates this type of hermeneutic educational agenda. The connection between the ends of democratic education and the creation of agency within communicative space can be seen when examining the current paradigm of education.

There are a variety of asserted Truths within education. These Truths are founded upon technology, science, reason, empiricism, and/or social constructions that struggle for dominance (Brandt, 2000). The epistemological paradigm may allow for this hegemonic interaction of potential foundations for Truth, but the question of there being a Truth is not brought forward. Education strives to relay the Truth to the learners so that they then function throughout their lives from the foundation of a correct relationship to the world. Each foundation asserts that its Truth provides the only correct relationship to the world. Educational politics derive from the contest concerning what Truth will take precedence. Standardized testing's importance within the institutions of education testifies to this epistemological dominance.

As educators seek certainty of their efficacy as teachers through the development of achievement test scores, they are buying into a paradigm that asserts the existence of a knowable Truth. If the qualities of a forced-choice question are examined, this assertion of Truth becomes transparent. A forced-choice question offers a learner a set of options that are potential responses to a particular question. There is a pre-determined, absolutely true answer to the question. Any learner who fails to recognize the correct answer is seen as confused, mistaken, or less proficient. The aspect of the learner as an agent in the construction of meaning through communicative rationality is denied. A forced-choice question does not allow for communicative rationality, interpretation is not given a space within the question, and understanding is not assessed. Standardized testing is based upon the premise that the tester is absolutely certain about the Truth and the purpose of the test is to determine if the learner has acquired proficiency at recognizing that Truth. The politics of the relationship between tester and learner is far from democratic or interactive.

Gadamer helps to shed some light on the significance of this closure within education. It is important to notice that forced-choice standardized testing does close the space of communicative rationality, and therefore denies a space for understanding to develop. Gadamer states this dilemma well:

> Only where the process of understanding is disrupted, that is, where understanding will not succeed, are questions asked about the wording of the text, and only then can the reconstruction of the text become a task in its own right. (cited in Michelfelder & Palmer, 1989, p. 32)

As teachers and schools attempt to demonstrate their proficiency by training students to perform on standardized tests, they are actually encouraging their students *not* to question. This is precisely what Gadamer asserts to be the first step in the reconstruction and development of understanding. Unfortunately, educational institutions operate from epistemological foundations that legitimate the alienation of students as agents within communicative reason's dialectic. Students become passive recipients of knowledge.

Schools are faced with the challenge of relaying the appropriate knowledge to their students so that those students can become productive citizens. Standardized testing proposes to assess a learner's proficiency in this area. A student's scores on these tests are meant to be indicators of their potential productivity. Funding decisions made by

governing institutions reinforce this challenge. The question arises as to what "productive citizen" means? The development of curriculum traditions that attempt to answer this question give us a glimpse of how educators view productive citizenship. Five distinct traditions (or orientations) have been identified by Elliot Eisner: a) Cognitive Processes, b) Academic Rationalism, c) Personal Relevance, d) Social Adaptation and Social Reconstruction, and e) Technology (Eisner, 1985, 1991; Glatthorn & Jailal, 2000). Each of these curriculum traditions is founded upon an epistemology. Democracy in this context refers to the availability of this knowledge to all. It is not a matter of process; democracy is equated to equal opportunity to learn this knowledge. The competition (or politics) among decision-makers within the educational institutions, in this context, becomes a matter of which epistemology does society deem most relevant. Who these decision-makers are becomes a matter of political power within society.

Glatthorn and Jailall (2000) have analyzed the politics of these competing traditions by utilizing the analogy of streams of influence. Instead of presenting a politics of all-or-nothing, with one tradition dominating and then excluding the others, they present a politics in which one stream will have greater flow, or increased interest, at certain times. The increased influence of any one of the streams can be a result of changes within the social or economic context in which education functions. Glatthorn and Jailall develop a hegemonic politics that can help shed light upon the epistemological politics that this essay hopes to overcome. Political economy and hegemonic theory, in particular, help to explain the dilemma that this creates.

Hegemony results from the institutional development of values that are then socialized so participants within the system view them as legitimate. The epistemology that serves as the philosophic foundation for these values also legitimates the means that are most effective at achieving the value/ends (Keohane, 1984). The hegemonic epistemology that gains dominance will define the institution, in this case education, in such a manner as to make the other value systems serve as means to achieve the defined value / ends. The tradition that achieves hegemony will decide the function of the alternative traditions within the educational institution. Politically the decision concerning which tradition to prioritize originates from tensions within the society that the school is meant to serve. The final decision is a matter of political or economic power, not democracy or communicative rationality. The subordinate traditions become means to achieve the ends defined by the

hegemonic system; the consequences for learning and the learner are real. So, what should education do to free itself from this politics? How do we change the paradigm?

Fortunately, the answer does not lead into uncharted territory. Education simply turns toward hermeneutics. James Giarelli asserts an interesting direction:

> The only corrective I know of is to take a dialectical view more seriously. For example, I think Dewey's descriptive metaphysics, which gives equal ontological status to the stable and predictable and the precarious and contingent exemplifies this thorough-going dialectical view. In trying to describe the way in which Deweyan metaphysics overcomes the dualism of both foundationalism and anti-foundationalism, I have called his view an ontology of chance, a comprehensive philosophy of incompleteness, a foundationalism of uncertainty, and an objectivism of the random. (1993, n.p.)

This view would place a value on the process of education as a space of communicative rationality in which participants learn the skills of hermeneutic agency. The hermeneutic operations of interpretation, communication, collaboration, critical thinking, analysis, and synthesis would gain priority.

By re-examining the communicative space of education from a hermeneutic perspective, it will be possible to escape the hegemonic, and therefore hierarchical, structure that derives from an epistemological perspective. Richard Rorty explains the limitations created by viewing the dialogue through epistemology:

> We have not *got* a language which will serve as a permanent neutral matrix for formulating all good explanatory hypotheses, and we have not the foggiest notion of how to get one. So epistemology – as the attempt to render all discourses commensurable by translating them into a preferred set of terms – is unlikely to be a useful strategy. (1979, pp. 348-349)

The obvious criticism is that education will become relativist: asserting that anything goes and is of equal value. Hermeneutics does not claim legitimacy for all. Hermeneutics becomes a way of coping with a dynamic communicative space in which educational relationships get negotiated. Remember that mis-understanding occurs when the totality of relationships that exist within a specific context are not considered.

This paradigm requires an opening of the communicative spaces within the institutions of education and all of society. Social philosophers such as Benjamin Barber assert the importance of this paradigm shift

for the survival of democracy and its values (1998) . Controversies such as multiculturalism, prejudice, technological innovation, and globalism that surround democratic education point to the need for a turn toward hermeneutics. The creation of agency within hermeneutics has an inter-causal relationship with communicative rationality similar to the relationship between a text and its interpretation. The process of communicative rationality opens up the possibility of agency while agency is the process of communicative rationality. When education focuses its attention upon what is the appropriate knowledge to transmit, students are excluded from the experiences that enable them to participate in and develop communicative rationality. Engaging students in the negotiation of relevance also engages them in the educational process. As they become empowered within the communicative dialogue, they become agents within a democratic process.

Negotiating relevance becomes the process for determining curriculum focus. The shift that this indicates is away from an assertion of Truth, or the assertion that there is a set of knowledge that must be mastered in order for an individual to be a productive citizen, toward an assertion of agreement. Again, Rorty helps to demonstrate this point:

> There is no "ground" for such loyalties and convictions save the fact that the beliefs and desires and emotions which buttress them overlap those of lots of other members of the group with which we identify for purposes of moral or political deliberations, and the further fact that these are *distinctive* features of that group, features which it uses to construct its self-image through contrast with other groups. (1991, p. 200)

This perspective based upon hermeneutics relies upon looking at the experiences that individuals have and how individuals construct meaning from those experiences. Politics shifts from a competition over what is *valuable knowledge* to a context in which intersubjective agreement and engagement in the dialogue to construct that agreement is the goal (Rorty, 1991). The collaborative development of understanding stands in stark contrast to the politics of epistemology in which there is right and wrong knowledge.

If education wishes to address social, economic, and political objectives, then the process of education needs to reflect those objectives. Education can help to further the objectives of democracy, pluralism, and interdependence by utilizing these processes as educational methods. Understanding and democratic agency result from

participation in their respective processes: they are not learned, but experienced. Proficiency in understanding cannot be assessed epistemologically through forced-choice testing, and neither can democratic competency be assessed through authoritarian processes like standardized curriculum.

Society consists of multiple, overlapping, communicative spaces. An individual's ability to negotiate these spaces and communicate within these multiple contexts becomes the criteria for determining an individual's productivity and development. Within this paradigm, society's purpose is dynamic and changes from each individual's perspective and throughout the passage of time. Democracy serves as a negotiating process within this fluid social context. Rorty helps to shed some light on this position:

> The political discourse of the democracies, at its best, is the exchange of what Wittgenstein called "reminders for a particular purpose" – anecdotes about the past effects of various practices and predictions of what will happen if, or unless, some of these are altered. The moral deliberations of the postmodernist bourgeois liberal consists largely in this same sort of discourse, avoiding the formulation of general principles except where the situation may require this particular tactic. (1991, p. 201)

Political Pluralism attempts to negotiate this context by bracketing the competitive politics of individualism and communitarianism. This "discourse of the democracies" becomes de-centered as pluralism comes to characterize the social context.

In Avigail Eisenberg's text, *Reconstructing Political Pluralism* (1995), a discussion of the manner in which group power and individual interest development interact is presented. Eisenberg's reconstruction attempts to reconcile (or mediate) the hegemonic dialogue within the epistemological tensions that were identified earlier in this essay. As she states quite clearly:

> I argue that political pluralism offers the means to resolve the familiar tensions between political power and individual development, between individual autonomy and group membership, and thus between individualism and communitarianism. ...It accomplishes this by (1) insisting that group power not be centralized in society, (2) ensuring that individuals can effectively transform their associational ties, and (3) understanding the relation between group power and individual development. (1995, p. 5)

If education follows these guidelines, a locally controlled, collaboratively developed, and participatory curriculum can be developed. By maintaining a hermeneutic position, educators can facilitate this pluralistic conceptualization of society.

What is the role of education within this context? The importance of creating an institution that does not socialize its members based upon an epistemology that cannot be validated coincides with the pluralist position. Education should serve as a medium through which students can examine the groups they are associated with, whether voluntary, involuntary, or non-voluntary, and critically examine the identity that these groups help them to develop. The ability to critique the identity that we have as individuals and as communities is central to the democratic mission. By adopting a hermeneutic position we are free to make mistakes in our associations, recognize these mistakes through critical reflection, and transform ourselves through a realignment of our social attachments.

Education must recognize that it is one association among many that helps to develop the identities of those who participate within it. The initial question concerning the relationship between the school and the student becomes absurd. School and the individual student overlap within a pluralist political structure. They share a communicative space within each individual and community as these individuals and communities attempt to construct an identity. Teachers and students, administration and faculty, school and parents cease to be antagonists, as they can be within the epistemological paradigm. They become cooperative and collaborative agents. The "Us versus Them" dichotomy that characterizes much of the politics of education is bracketed as "We" attempt to construct an identity. This fluctuation in attachments allows us to benefit from each of the curriculum traditions, and through the instructional methodologies that have been developed within them, to expand our reflective abilities. Exposure to multiple contexts and reflective practices becomes the key to the educational institution (Eisenburg, 1995).

Efforts to bring students into experiences connected to their communities and to help them reflect upon those experiences is the key function of education. Participation within a collaborative community requires that individuals acquire competency as reflective agents. Helping students to recognize the constituent groups that they use to construct their identities and to critically examine the values and images that these groups contribute to them, constitutes a complicated mission

for educators and schools. A paradigm shift which accepts a pluralist political vision allows education to develop a cooperative relationship with the community it serves. By moving beyond the epistemological paradigm that currently dominates educational institutions, we can stop attempting to validate the paradigm through standardized testing. Hermeneutics offers educational institutions the opportunity to re-engage teachers, students, and other stakeholders (parents) in a meaningful democratic dialogue. Participation in the communicative space created by this dialogue is a worthy objective for our educational institutions.

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