

EDUC 208B Curriculum Construction

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Reading Reflection

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One dichotomy that seems particularly striking when it comes to comparing traditional and progressive education is that of content and context. Content seems more closely related with traditional education, and context with progressive education. On the one hand, content is generally seen as something to be remembered. On the other, context—a slightly more difficult term to nail down—is something to be aware of. But as John Dewey notes, an either-or dichotomy between such ideas is doomed to fail. Content in a vacuum is harmful and oppressive. Context without content can take no meaningful intellectual or practical form. And yet, the balance between the two is often hotly contested. How do you emphasize one without neglecting the other? I argue that content and context cannot and should not be disentangled from each other (this is not a new argument), as articulated (with various degrees of emphasis) by John Dewey, Howard Gardner, and Paolo Friere.

Friere takes the most extreme stance when it comes the dichotomy between content and context. The term he uses to lambast traditional education, “banking,” is an extreme version of traditional education that prioritizes content over context. Under the banking paradigm, education crams information into young people’s brains in a way that saps their creativity, agency, and intellectual power. (Friere uses the metaphor of “depositing” content into the “receptacles” of students (72).) When the content of learning is presented as static, students perceive reality as unchangeable, and therefor become susceptible to oppression. His solution involves a fluid interpretation of reality, instilling into students a belief that the status quo can and should be changed, and that they are the agents of that change.

I agree with Friere that an extreme version of content imposition is oppressive, but I disagree that the notion of students as “containers” of information is unequivocally wrong. So powerfully does Friere portray how the depositing of content, *when performed in a certain way*, results in the oppression of recipients that the reader comes away with the impression that a student remembering any content bequeathed by a teacher is in danger of losing all her creative faculties. Friere thus falls prey to the black-and-white view which underlies much of activist philosophy: that in order to change the world, one must adopt an extremist binary view. The list of “banking” features he presents on page 73 offers a representation of this:

- a) The teacher teaches and the students are taught
- b) The teacher knows everything and the student knows nothing
- c) The teacher thinks and the students are thought about
- d) The teacher talks and the student listens—meekly
- e) The teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined...

The list goes on. Each of these examples represents an extreme version of an aspect of education which in reality should involve some mixture of the two poles. For example, a teacher may not know *everything*, but it is highly likely that she knows more than the student, by the mere fact of her age and adult status in society. In the relationship between teacher and student, then, I would place more emphasis on the teacher. When it comes to who does the talking and who listens, on the other hand, I would place more emphasis on the student (doing the speaking), because I believe that speaking

involves more intellectual activity than listening. Each of us may have a different take on what ratio of such extremes is ideal in education, but I maintain that the ideal is a ratio, not an absolute.

Dewey is much more sympathetic to a balanced view of content and context than Friere. Indeed, he opens his book by noting the prevalence of “Either-Ors” in human habits of thinking, and begins to gradually erode such binaries as his philosophies unfold (mainly in relation to traditional and progressive ideologies). For example, let us take his stance on the balance between freedom of the learner and external imposition on the learner. On the one hand, he aligns himself with Friere and criticizes the kind of external imposition which is associated with traditional education, allowing that it “limited rather than promoted the intellectual and moral development of the young” (22). But, rather than clinging to the extremist’s view, Dewey circles back with the question: “Just what is the role of the teacher and of books in promoting the educational development of the immature?” (22). A teacher and a book each represent “external” sources of content, which can be used to fill the “containers” of young people’s minds. But they need not necessarily be “imposed,” and are therefore not bad by definition.

Dewey champions freedom—particularly, freedom of the mind (as opposed to freedom of the body), also seen as freedom of judgment (as opposed to freedom of movement)—but does so in a way that holds space for structure. He uses the example of a children’s game: “The games do not go on haphazardly or by a succession of improvisations. Without rules there is no game” (52). Freedom is necessary, he seems to say, but freedom has an asterisk. Dewey writes, “As long as the game goes on with reasonable smoothness, the players do not feel they are submitting to external imposition but that they are playing a game” (53). The players may not *feel* they are “submitting to external imposition,” *but they are*. The rules of the game are an external, standardized mandate, usually steeped in “tradition and precedent” (53). The difference between a children’s game and Friere’s “banking” system of education is not the presence or absence of external forces, but the *perception* of the nature of those forces. Herein lies the paradoxical orthogonal-yet-symbiotic relationship between content and context. Content deposited in receptacles in one way is necessary scaffolding for learning; content deposited in another way is an imposition on freedom; and the only way to tell the difference lies in the perception of children. No wonder learning theories seem to chase endlessly in circles.

Here we are, I am only just getting to Gardner, and I seem to be running out of ink. Let us just say that Gardner eschews the dichotomy between content and context by recommending three categories of content (the good, the true, and the beautiful) which are so dependent on context that they are barely recognizable. It is easy to see how “beauty” and “goodness” lie in the eye of the beholder, but even “truth,” in Gardner’s view, applies equally to plate tectonics as it does to traditional Chinese medicine. Even though he posits his own preferences for teaching truth, beauty and goodness (the theory of evolution, Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro*, and the history of the Holocaust, respectively), he refuses to make any actual decisions about what can and cannot fall under those categories. They are each “tentative,” and “personal.” Their definitions are “best left to a specific educational community” (23). Such latitude is unlikely to resolve any disputes among educators.