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the trouble of western education

William Gaudelli

Western education is paradoxically a progenitor of the contemporary global moment and a foil to the continuation of the world that it helped create. This might seem to be a hyberbolic claim yet the evidence grows more abundant as time passes. The litany of troubles that can be laid at the doorstep of Western education, in part, include the environmental catastrophe in all its manifestations, the growing anomic sense of alienation that besets Western societies, chasmic economic inequalities, and related displacement of people from their polities, or the absence of any legal citizenship that besets millions, to name just a few.

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This is of course not the first time that a question like this has been asked, as George Counts (1978) asked a very similar one in his now famous title, *Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order?* Counts' first draft of this title came in the form of a speech delivered to the Progressive Education Association meeting at Teachers College, Columbia University in 1932 as the world lurched into a chasmic global economic depression and sat on the cusp of a massive world war that would rend the fledgling international order into pieces. The call to rethink what modernist education had wrought, in just the first century of its proliferation, helps contemporary readers understand that the sense of Western education as fundamentally *out-of-joint* is not a novel insight, but an enduring one.

Counts is part of a long legacy of 20th century intellectuals working on the same grand critique, including John Dewey (1944) in *Democracy and Education*, through Paolo Freire's (2014) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, to Ivan Illich (1971) in *Deschooling Society* to Maxine Greene's (1973) *Teacher as Stranger*. All had foundational concerns about the trouble of Western education, though they all

operated from within its hold. The criticisms leveled against Western education brought by Dewey included the separation of people from the lived world through the academic mechanism of schooling, distending and making artificial subjects like geometry (earth-measure) and biology (life-study) out of what was fundamentally a social study. That the derivations, or disciplines, were so cut-off from the origins of inquiry sapped the intellectual energy and engagement possible of these otherwise grounded subjects, making them appear more as made-up studies rather than rooted in any real world. In a similar vein, Freire decried the banking conception of learning, one that approached people as being empty vessels needing to be filled with the contents of academic learning. Freire argued in turn that the experience of being, and specifically of being oppressed, created a verdant landscape for people to see their circumstance in light of a wider, social whole, a system structured to perpetuate the power of those who oppress and the oppression of the powerless.

Beginning from a similar starting point, Illich argues that the mechanistic, economic and political needs of the state are the overriding concerns of contemporary, institutionalized education. His radical approach is the dissolution of education as an activity of the state, arguing that liberation and freedom are achievable when people direct their own learning in association with others rather than through the coercive power of a state. Greene (1973) urged educators and students to be wide awake, developing consciousness about themselves and their circumstances, through aesthetics and the arts. She worried that the stuff of modern life led people into a malaise of routine and habit that prevented them from truly being in the world.

The contemporary global scene is not unlike what situations fueled these earlier critiques. Anomie over the state of institutionalized education, chasmic inequalities in the quality of education afforded children based largely on the situation of their birth (e.g., social class), the sense of separation of people from the biosphere that objectifies non-human animals and the academicization of content that serves the master of sorting and distributing an ostensibly limited resource of access to education, all of these conditions can be found readily in educational systems throughout the contemporary world and are all wound within Western-style education.

Paul Tough (Tough, 2019), for example, studied the college selection process of elite universities in the U.S. through the vantage point of economically disadvantaged students aiming to attend. While some urban, economically poor students are able to crack the code of premier schools and gain entry and job success, the system is not premised on the same principle. Tough's work underscores the outlier problem of equity and access in education; simply that while there are exceptional cases like the students he highlights, the system is designed to perpetuate privilege rather than implicate the conditions that created the college admissions system, a critical gateway to economic success.

Education – by institution – has suffered from a tautological assumption that aggregating more education necessarily leads to social development, as opposed to what is actually occurring, which is the perpetuation of an unjust system of education through the sorting mechanism of Western education. This assumption leads people to focus on education as a resource, or as an asset that needs to be diffused, rather than as a content, or about what constitutes a meaningful, quality education, or even more, to rethink the very nature of education being offered. The need for universal access is indisputable, yet access alone will not achieve quality nor a reconsideration of education itself. In fact, expanding access tends to create the illusion of quality – as more youth have access to some education – but may only serve to entrench systemic inequality while failing to acknowledge the limitations of education as a universal type. If, for example, universal access were

to be achieved tomorrow, while embedding the current chasmic differences in quality, the argument would undoubtedly shift towards questions like, "Why are you not taking full advantage of your access?" rather than a redoubling of effort to make that which is accessible also of high quality or to inspecting the limits of what now is prized as education.

The access-to-quality shift has begun to occur in educational discourse as there is a growing recognition that simply achieving access is an insufficient, even misleading, measure of quality. The transition from the Millennial to the Sustainable Development Goals on education is a good illustration of that change. In the Millennial Development Goals 2000-15, Goal 2 addressed the need for "access to universal primary education" (Sustainable Development Goals, 2020). This goal was revised in the Sustainable Development Goals (2020) to include Goal 4.7 which states,

> Ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.

The contrast of statements is notable given that the former was silent on quality and the latter is explicit, importantly making attention to the very issues at stake in the overarching SDG goals framework the focus of what constitutes meaningful learning. While there is widespread critique of the SDG framework, including its limited address of women's issues and refugee concerns to technical/infrastructure issues around data collection, it does signal a shift in dialogue about what development means in education. Yet, a more challenging question underneath affirmations of 'human rights' and 'gender equality' as quality education is the vehicle of Western education as *the* mode of conveyance. At a wider scope of view, even when quality is asserted in terms of the stuff of education, it is always presumed to be in a Western mode. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2008) has noted in his acclaimed work *Provincializing Europe* (Chakrabarty, 2008) the presumed universality of European education is illusory, requiring it to be historicized, re/placed in its original, specific temporal context without the illusory trappings of a claim to universality.

What then should be our focus in a reconstituted, non-Western mode of education for the 21st century and beyond? Three issues stand-out among many about what a reconstituted education ought to rethink: anthropocentrism, alienation and academicization. While I treat them separately they are all drawn from the same cloth as the points of overlap will be apparent throughout.

Anthropocentrism of education in a Western mode is perhaps the deepest part of the grammar that organizes education today and occludes its alternatives. Institutional education arose alongside industrialization so its unsurprising that the ethos of productivity, efficiency and environment as a resource-trove/limitless dump became interwoven in modern schooling. The results of this deep logic, however, have come to haunt the contemporary world as the failure to account for ecosystems is leading to catastrophic effects, the leading edge of those now underway. The new education, for lack of a better descriptor, will need to be more realistic in terms of the dependency of people on the biosphere, to recenter human wants and desires within earth's parameters. This is no small task as education is so tightly wedded to Western-style economic development of 'eternal growth' that the very purpose and rationale of education as it is now constituted will be forced into

reconsideration.

The subordination of non-human animals to serve the needs of the market economic system, for example, is illustrative of the deeply embedded nature of the problem. P-12 students are at times taught this subordination explicitly, as elementary classrooms keep animals, visit zoos and employ the false human/animal dichotomy to interpret the world. As students progress to middle and secondary history, social studies and economics, this thinking becomes even more entrenched in how the world is 'calculated'. As Kopnina and Cherniak (2015) note:

> The literature is replete with references to natural *resources*, natural *capital*, and ecosystem *services*, conceptualizing nature through an anthropocentric, utilitarian lens while the recognition of the intrinsic value of biodiversity seldom appears in the same space. (Kopnina & Cherniak, 2015, p.366)

There are already strands of an alternative curriculum discourse emerging in education. Deep environmental education, place-based education and related types are some of the iterations that serve to interrupt the normative anthropocentric stance of Western education. But these well-intended curricular efforts happening within are easily subsumed by the whole of Western education, which has a tendency to consume and totalize diversity in its own body.

A second assumption that needs to be unpacked in a new, post-Western education mode is that of alienation. Western education has propagated alienation in myriad ways – of curricula from their social origins, of people, schools and institutions from their communities, and of learning from the everyday practice of being. The germ of alienation has certain value as the ability to make elements discrete for the purpose of closer analysis, or to conduct research, is elemental to study, as a field biologist, historian or linguist cannot study, respectively, a biome, epoch or language, in their entirety all at once. Further, being estranged from subject matter can provide fresh and novel insights, seeing a thing in its fullness without the presuppositions that prefigure and occlude what is in view. All of this is to the good. But the failure to reinstate what is known into a community where that knowledge has value, from which it issued, is too often the problematic result of this way of thinking. As education is dislocated from its sites of origin, segmented into pieces for distribution that mirrors the units of factory-like production, distribution, and profit/value, it loses connectivity to its social being. Knowledge thus becomes a commodity as opposed to a commons. In the U.S., for example, universities typically have an office of community outreach or some unit that functions for this purpose. This office is a modest recognition of alienation within the university-community relationship, or the fact that data drawn from the community has an obligation to return to the same, though notably on the terms of the university who holds the power.

Academicization, or the move to abstract the social world into deliverable components of 'knowledge' for ostensibly efficient conveyance from teacher to student, is quite similar to alienation and at the core of what it means to know in a Western frame. Dewey was keenly sensitive to the damage done by this perpetual displacement in the learning of children. He reported the observation of a geography lesson in a classroom in Moline, Illinois, through which the Mississippi River runs. When the teacher tried to explain that the river referred to in the book was the same one that flowed through town, the students were surprised on the grounds that what was 'of school' had no social equivalent (Dewey, 1990, p. 75). School, students believed, was an artificial world of inert material

that needed to be ingested for its own sake. Students had imbibed the foundational conception that learning at school, in geography or otherwise, was just a "hodge-podge of unrelated fragments" or a "veritable rag-bag of intellectual odds and ends: The height of a mountain here, the course of a river there, the quantity of shingles produced in this town, the tonnage of the shipping in that, the boundary of a county, the capital of a state" (Dewey, 1933, MW 9 p. 219). The alienation here points to a failure to recognize and honor the lifeworld of a child, who is not predisposed to think the world in academic terms, doing so only exacerbating the artificiality of school and learning.

Academicization, or the making of this hodge-podge, sits at the core of alienation. Society teaches young people to alienate their world, themselves from it, from their social relations and being, by incessantly delivering 'contents' that need to be 'digested', rewarding those who consume them best, or alienate themselves most skillfully, and punishing those who not. On both ends of the spectrum, low achievers and high achievers, share at least one commonality: a sense of anomie, even deadness, about the dislocation of learning from being. Observe a group of kindergartners and you will likely hear myriad questions over the course of the day, bubbling with enthusiasm and wonder about the world and their life in it. Imagine that same group by the time they have reached high school and almost none of the questions are their own, only simulated, external ones that are coercively required of them.

Dewey's attempt to envisage a utopia just at the completion of his long and storied academic career is instructive about alternatives to deadened learning that besets Western education. Dewey's ideal 'school' was ironically not school at all, but society. Turning the function of learning into all aspects of living, there would be no need for schools in utopia. Dewey's imaginative essay published in the *New York Times* in 1933, imaginatively set at some later date, points to what an educative society might look like:

> I inquired, having a background of our own schools in mind, how with their methods they ever made sure that the children and youth really learned anything, how they mastered the subject matter, geography and arithmetic and history, and how they ever were sure that they really learned to read and write and figure. Here, too, at first I came upon a blank wall. For they asked, in return to my question, whether in the period from which I came for a visit to Utopia it was possible for a boy or girl who was normal physiologically to grow up without learning the things which he or she needed to learn – because it was evident to them that it was not possible for anyone except a congenital idiot to be born and to grow up without learning. When they discovered, however, that I was serious, they asked whether it was true that in our day we had to have schools and teachers and examinations to make sure that babies learned to walk and to talk. It was during these conversations that I learned to appreciate how completely the whole concept of acquiring and storing away things had been displaced by the concept of creating attitudes by shaping desires and developing the needs that are significant in the process of living. (Dewey, 1933, pp. 139-140)

This essay is a brief exploration of the challenges in Western education and what might come next to renew the social, and thereby educational, order. As I claimed at the outset, there is nothing new in issuing such warnings since calls for foundational reform from within Western education have indeed always been a part of the same. The lift of making such monumental changes is radically

hefty, however. Yet, there is a growing understanding that we are *too-much-with-the-world* in our current relationship. One only needs to watch the testimony of Australians in the aftermath of the devastating fires in the last few months to see the change of the future in their eyes.

One thought lingers: how do we undo the dynamic tension of Western education, indeed society, appropriating its own critique. The tendency for Western education to consume diversity within itself is perhaps the most challenging dimension of the whole endeavor undertaken by those who recognize the serious damage done by Western education. Like a collapsed, giant star that creates a vacuuming black hole, Western education too is a force that allows nothing to escape its gravity. The obvious dominance of anthropocentrism in curriculum, in Western education, has led to a robust internal critique and the emergence of alternatives, to be sure. And yet, there is a perniciousness about Western education, indeed of Western social organization generally, that cannot readily be escaped. This is a confounding recognition; that most of the critiques mounted herein have already been issued forcefully, only to have been subsumed to a large degree within the fold of Western education. What then?

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