

The Challenge of Community and Dialogue in a Rational Education

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ABSTRACT

The growth of formal organizations and technical reason over the last few centuries has given schools and academic institutions their contemporary form. They operate, in principle, as technically rational institutions, with explicit goals and processes designed to attain them. The knowledge which they claim to teach is based on naturalism and reason, unlike most older institutions of learning. However, they are now facing growing challenges from multiple directions. Critical theorists, for instance, have pointed to the importance of ethics and aesthetics in human life. Feminist theory, Post-Structuralism, Dalit theory and Decolonial theory have pointed to the culturally embedded character of reason and institutional processes, which while claiming universal validity, actually come from a particular group's standpoint and are imposed upon all others. A variety of national and cultural movements around the world have taken up their language to oppose knowledges which emerged out of science, reason and realism. Faced by these challenges it is tempting to give up the pursuit of finding ethical or empirically-based principles that possess at least some degree of inter-subjective validity. But it would be unwise to do so. This project remains important since it can help us navigate between contending positions to either choose between them or to synthesize them into what their respective bearers will together agree is a better principle or interpretation. If education is not to lock different communities into separate water-tight compartments, then it must teach ways of talking across boundaries. This may often call for us to balance out the distorting effects of power over truth. The direction forward may be to eschew final truths and instead to recognize different cultural positions, and to engage in dialogues between them. The process of knowing in education cannot be seen as a monocultural project but has to necessarily include the process of dialogue and be seen as a multicultural project.

Keywords: Education, Epistemology, Dialogue, Power, Multiculturalism

1. INTRODUCTION

We now acknowledge the influence of many social locations in university and school curricula much more than before. These different social locations often have their own respective perceptions of valid knowledge and about what ought to be taught. This paper focuses on the problem of what to make of this apparent diversity in possible curricula. Across the world, it is being argued that schools are dominated by western knowledge. African, South American, Chinese

and Indian groups are constantly challenging this ideology. In India we are seeing contestations of school and university knowledge by not just Hindutva groups but also by Dalit, tribal and feminist organizations. This has been accompanied by a long-standing critique of school knowledge by Marxist groups which claim that it is primarily designed to suit managers and owners and not workers. Most of the time the struggle between different social groups is seen as being related to power. New curricula are viewed

as arbitrary in nature and often implemented by administrative and political force. This is unfortunate. This paper suggests dialogue as a better way of deciding what should be taught and about what needs to be done if we want to prepare for such a dialogue.

It is pertinent to acknowledge that the last couple of centuries have been an era of a rational education, in the Weberian sense of rationalization. Early humans and most of us till a couple of centuries ago learned in our families and neighbourhood through informal methods. Children learned by observation, trying things out and playing with them, with occasional directions and nudges from the more knowledgeable. Formal, systematic instruction with a directed, conscious, explicitly articulated goal and with explicit feedback loops was rare. Schools and universities, as formal institutions of learning, where specialized teachers taught full-time students seem to have first emerged with the growth of social inequality and social differentiation. Such specialized institutions existed in small numbers for thousands of years, going hand in hand with the rise of intensive agriculture and the emergence of cities. In Buddhist institutions of 1500 years ago, like Nalanda, we have evidence of formalization and rationalization, with a centralized institution and the existence of curricula, rules for admissions and rules for progression to higher levels of learning. But very few out of the populace went to Nalanda and those who did were mostly men. Similar institutions existed in the ancient period in Mesopotamia and China and later began to emerge in Europe too. Education in the sense of schools and universities really began to spread its reach only from the second half of the 18th century. The growth of mass education, where large numbers of the populace go to formal schools, is to be seen from the setting up of public education in Prussia in the beginning of the 19th century. Mass schooling was subsequently taken

up by states in many parts of the world. This was accompanied by the belief that schools were a means of access to a cultured life and an ethically superior existence. In India, the British pushed for a big jump in education in the shape of formal organizations from the 19th century onwards.

Many critical theorists have shown this as the worldwide pattern of the growth of technical, instrumental reason. There has been an increase in systematization and rationalization of content and process to match the goals of education. The popularity of technical rationality is mainly because it consolidates power. It helps to coordinate large numbers of people and pushes them towards a common goal. Formal organizations do this much more efficiently for repetitive tasks than informal organizations and are able to work at much larger scales than kinship-based or patrimonial organizations. The concentration of power is at the core of formal organizations and that is why states and institutions like the church and a variety of interest groups have promoted schools and universities in the format of formal organizations.

It is important to note that formal organizations are not necessarily authoritarian in character and can also take up democratic, decentralized forms. We do have many examples of the decentralized concentration and use of power in democratic schools, cooperatives like the kibbutz, and so on. They offer the advantages of systematization and rationalization without the burden of having to carry the weight of decisions taken to suit only the top. Critical pedagogy is one of the prominent approaches in education which tries to share and democratize the responsibility of formulating curricula and pedagogies. However, the way most schools and universities have come up showed a contrasting emphasis on centralization, pushing particular curricula and the existence of a number of processes which compelled everyone, including the teachers and the students, to accept them.

This got connected with other institutional rules, like for instance, the British declaring in 1844 that those with certificates from British-style educational institutions would be given priority in recruitment to state jobs. Examinations, the fear of being left out of the labour market and a rigid teacher education, all combined to make educational institutions a highly integrated and tightly controlled site.

A prominent method used to concentrate power was to claim epistemic validity for the content taught in educational institutions. The growth of formal organizations and scientific thinking in western Europe had helped enormously in the colonial project. Science and western civilization, not surprisingly, became the accepted norm of valid curricula in schools and universities around the world. This helped in getting support from the political environment and in convincing teachers and students of the correctness of what they were doing. Education was presented as a universal truth, claiming to have, like western academics, a Gods eye view of the universe. This was not unique to academics and drew upon the metaphors and claims of popular interpretations of Christian, Islamic and Hindu theology, all of which claimed to have a final grasp of eternal truth. There were many dissidents to such an epistemological position, but curricula and educational institutions carried forth as if they had all the answers.

2. OPPOSITION TO UNIVERSAL KNOWLEDGE

The opposition to this universalist view of knowledge has come from several sources. The Indian freedom struggle brought forward several criticisms of such a view of education. Various visions of education came up that clashed with British curricula, ranging from Gokhale's views on education to the setting up of national schools as part of the non-cooperation movement.

Gandhi's Nai Talim is the best known and most elaborately developed alternative to British colonial curricula. It challenged the claims of universal reason that British schools and universities were making. Indian nationalists like Gandhi argued that British schools taught a culture that was specifically British and colonialist in character. It sought to teach subservience to British political and economic agendas. This was to be confronted by an Indian version of culture and that would lead to swaraj, which was not just political but also economic and cultural in character. People today often talk about decolonizing education as a new trend, but this is an old agenda in Indian education.

Within western academics itself post-structuralist and post-modern theorists began to rise to ascendance some two generations ago. These questioned foundationalist visions of how we got our knowledge. While the foundationalists believed it was possible to find strong foundations for knowledge, the non-foundationalists denied that. They said that we don't have a direct grasp of reality, we are always perceiving it through cultural lenses. We grow up with certain experiences and certain exposures to ideas and build particular ways of seeing and understanding the world. We are always constructing representations and hence can never be completely certain that we have a full and correct picture of what we seek to understand. We may claim greater approximations of reality, but we can never have rock-solid foundations, which are beyond challenge. This is a problem for certainty not just in the observation of facts, but even more so in our construction of ethical principles.

Many philosophers and social thinkers claimed great certainty in their ethical principles. Some like Immanuel Kant claimed that to challenge his ethics was to challenge reason itself. Others would seek justification for ethical positions by claiming divine sanction. The ten command-

ments, for instance, claimed to have come from God himself (God was considered to be the same gender as the powerful people talking about him). People also claim that today's Islamic principles or Hindu principles come from the Quran or from Sanatan Dharma, respectively, and hence enjoy full legitimacy and validity.

In a number of disciplines and knowledge systems like political science, or Dalit literature or feminist scholarship there is now an acceptance that knowledge is deeply influenced by the social location of its creators and of those who propagate it. The community and social location have become the centre of our attention when we look at what legitimizes knowledge. Even in western ethics there is a vigorous and significant body of scholars who believe that while moral reasoning is important, ultimately ethics rests upon intuition and experience and hence upon our community life which shapes that intuition.

The trend of relating knowledge to social location thus poses a fatal challenge to claims of universal reason and the God's eye version of knowledge. Schools and universities now can no longer claim that they have complete and final validity in what they are teaching. However, we are also now faced with new dangers.

The first new danger is the careless and self-centred thinking that on feeling free from the shadow of a history of scholarship, assumes that whatever it believes is true. As a result, many viewpoints have come up, which do not feel any burden of having to justify themselves. Some people declare that they are fully and completely correct just because they are Dalit or women or upper-caste Hindus or Muslims who spend a lot of time reading about Islam, and what they are saying seems to be shared by several others. Their argument is basically that if some claims sound right and fit their individual experience, then therefore those claims were correct. But this is just careless argumentation and even worse, it may be a form of arrogance, and we need to

guard against this.

The second danger we are facing is that, having declared that social location creates understandings, we are tempted to reject any claim which comes from another social location than ours. For instance, let's assume, I come from Punjab and believe that because the Rig Veda is said to have been composed in the land of the five rivers, then Punjabi style pronunciation is the oldest and hence it is the right way to speak any of the Indo-European languages of India like Hindi or Sanskrit. I reject any other position because it comes from non-Punjabis. The social location-knowledge connection declares that Haryanvis, Delhiites, Marathis, etc. just cannot understand my claim and cannot provide relevant arguments.

It can be contended that it is indeed possible to talk across communities. No community has a water-tight hermetically sealed cultural system which is incapable of speaking with others. Consider, for example, the sources or *pramaan* of cognition or *gyan* which Gotama's *Nyaya-sutras* (1913) mention. These include *pratyaksha* or observation, *anuman* or inference, *upman* or comparison and *shabda* or verbal testimony. These are shared by most epistemological systems of western natural and social science. These may not be understood everywhere in an identical way, but it is not possible to conclude that these have nothing at all in common. Clearly it is indeed possible to have conversations across cultures.

3. WHAT TO DO?

It may be unwise to give up entirely on the project of having ethical or empirically grounded principles with at least some degree of intersubjective validity. This project remains important since it can help us navigate between contending positions, especially when faced by the challenge of knowledge being linked to social locations. In everyday life and also, in matters

of grand policy we are continually confronted by different options. If we are not to renounce action altogether, we have to either choose between the options or to synthesize them into what their respective bearers will agree is better than any one of them alone. Thus, if education is not to lock different communities into separate watertight compartments, then it must teach ways of talking across boundaries. This may often call for us to balance out the distorting effects of power over truth. The direction forward may be to eschew claims of final truths and instead to recognize different cultural positions, and then to engage in dialogues between them. The process of knowing in education should be seen not as a monocultural but as a multicultural project and must necessarily include the process of dialogue. Dialogue thus emerges as one of the most important curricular goals for today's education. We need to teach not just how to validate knowledge, but also how to have a conversation with other systems of thought.

Scholarship and learning imply an education into systems of validation of knowledge. It calls for ways of weighing and legitimizing certain propositions and norms. We should realize that this should not be just an internal system of validation of a culture, but must also include dialogue with substantially different voices. For this, importantly, we also need to include the creation of the conditions for dialogue in our educational curricula. Why we need to build the conditions of dialogue is because it is NOT always possible to have a dialogue. It can only occur in certain conditions and when the participants have certain capabilities. Through education we can try to build these. Dialogue occurs only when its participants share certain norms, beliefs, emotions and practices and are in certain relationships with each other. Drawing from the works of several theorists of conflict (Rubin, Pruitt and Kim 1994, Fisher and Ury 1991 and Thomas 1992) it can be argued that there are at

least three kinds of necessary conditions:

First, that the participants should have been socialized into the basic cultural practices of dialogue. They should know how to listen to each other and how to identify each other's main interests and needs, looking beyond their immediate demands. They should be able to talk without insulting or threatening the other party. And they should value and know how to look for options which both parties might find acceptable. This includes, being able to reason on moral questions and to do practical reasoning, following the basic rules of coherent thinking, avoiding common logical fallacies.

Secondly there should be a valuing and a concern for both one's own goals and a concern and respect for the other person's goals. Dual concern theory says that, if my own goals are not particularly important for me, I will not make the effort to have a dialogue. If the other person's goals are held beneath contempt or seen with disgust, then too I cannot feel motivated to have a dialogue. Only when both my own and the other party's concerns are emotionally and morally important for me, in spite of my disagreeing with the specific demands that are being made, that I can have a dialogue. This calls for building conducive theories of justice in the world and relations of respect and affinity.

Thirdly, dialogue needs certain kinds of personal temperaments, with deeply embedded habits. People with deep personalities of aggression or of submission find it difficult to engage in dialogue. Similarly, if there are entrenched emotional and cognitive schema of hatred and distrust, then dialogue becomes impractical.

Power is important here, too, but interestingly equality of power does not seem to always be a necessary factor. If the above three conditions are conducive, then it is possible for even tyrants to have a dialogue with hermits. Power may indeed matter, direct or structural power seems to work

as a pressure which discourages certain options and encourages others. Having sufficient power to discourage the other group from avoiding dialogue often tends to make it easier to start a dialogue. When one group is very powerful and there is a great imbalance of power, that group may feel that a dialogue is not worth the effort. It is much easier for it to engage in coercion so as to get what it thinks is right. However, if the above three conditions are favourable for a dialogue – a culture of dialogue, concern for both participants' well-being and appropriate personality types – then even having an excess of coercive power will not lead a party to forego dialogue. Such people will still engage in a dialogue because they understand that arm-twisting the other person into agreement is unacceptable to them.

Power is important in another way, as well. The power which comes from legitimacy and from cultural validation makes it easier to engage in a dialogue. It is easier to talk with people when they share our own assumptions, narratives and aesthetics. The British found it easier to talk with Gandhi who spoke the language of peace and goodwill than with the '*rajas*' and '*nawabs*' who contested their rule. Gandhi cultivated arguments which were comprehensible and acceptable to a middle-class educated British administrator and put them forward in favour of India's freedom. This made it possible for the British to engage with him while all the time weighing the potentially disruptive consequences of the widespread respect Gandhi enjoyed among India's peasants and professionals.

From the above it may appear that dialogue is not very easy to implement. Neither is war and violence, though. Setting up the conditions and capabilities for dialogue, like for a successful military campaign, calls for effort and often years of labour. One must learn certain values and social skills. Concern for the other party needs to be established. We have to make sure that suitable individuals are at the forefront of it and

not put quarrelsome or submissive people in charge. Often one has to consolidate enough strength to make dialogue begin to appear the only feasible option for the other party. And one has to strive to find common grounds that both parties can agree upon and then try to move forward from there.

Dialogue calls for a willingness on both sides to try to understand the other's point of view. This may appear distasteful, but is a necessary condition for a more complete understanding. It also helps in building arguments that can persuade the other group of the validity of one's own claims. This can be an elaborate process since it may include discussions on how valid knowledge is constructed. Often this is at the crux of disputes and coming to a shared agreement on how to assess *pramaan* or how to agree upon norms is a lot of help.

I would like to conclude by paraphrasing what several scholars across a wide spectrum of positions like Seyla Ben-Habib (1992), J. Krishnamurti (1998), Juergen Habermas (1992) and many others have said: We are in an age where on the one hand the role of formal organizations and distant systems in our life has increased and on the other hand there is a greater emphasis on individualism so that using the blunt edge of force, to force people to accept claims cannot be sustained. More people seek validity in what their societies want them to do. This is performed in a variety of ways, from the use of WhatsApp campaigns to consumerism to religion. However, to sustain our increasingly complex social organizations and our technology, it is best if we try to construct validity through reason and by being reflexive and humane. We must recognize that no single group or individual has complete understanding of anything. Taking the path of arrogance or of isolation from other points of view, is not sustainable. The path to knowledge must instead include dialogue within it. Thus, it is the need of the hour to promote in

schools and universities, the conditions as well as the qualities, which are needed for dialogue.

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