

**Climbing out of the Box:
The Place for Idealism in Curriculum Design**

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I once had a disagreement with a gentleman about what constitutes a fine motorcycle. He stated that the Harley Davidson was the definition, the epitome of what a motorcycle should be. I observed that Harleys, besides having a reputation for being oversized and unwieldy brutes (a characterization which could often be applied to many of their owners), were undependable, inefficient, slow, and fabulously expensive, and if that was the definition of a fine motorcycle, I was surely missing something. He said I was – there was just something about Harleys, a quality that was difficult to define. “If you don’t get it, I’m not sure I can explain it to you,” he asserted, with that glazed look so common to those whose relationship to such ideas borders on the spiritual. I agreed to a point – I didn’t get it.

It is not enough for me to observe the results of sensory perception and human experience entering some spiritual or metaphysical “box”- and then leaving it transformed at the other side. To “get it,” I must know what is in the box. And, equally as important, I have to be able to describe the events and results surrounding the box’s contents beyond the vagueness of personal experience. I must be convinced that the results of my observations are replicable and transferable, that they transcend the limits of my own special humanness. As the son of an intense rationalist, raised in some of the heady days of science’s exponential expansion, I am most inclined to take the ruled stick which such a background implies, and use it to measure everything around me. I find comfort there - consistency, predictability, manageability – characteristics that are not without their merits. But I do *not* tend to gravitate to the logical and quantifiable because of its universal successes, but because of the inscrutable, ill-defined, often self-contradictory nature of other, competing approaches to human knowledge and existence. As an individual firmly entrenched in the rational, I seek the universal connectedness of knowledge, and associate most strongly with the attempts to express knowledge in universal terms, without the cast shadows of personal and individual slants, or the presence of boxes.

That does not mean that our Harley owner needs a definition couched strictly in physical or quantifiable terms like “zero to 60 in...” or “total cost of ownership.” As a student of mathematics, I find many truths to be the result of thought rather than of direct experience or measurement. The underlying logic or pattern to knowledge will yield to the careful observer, and the process of observation is often just as fruitful in the abstract as in the material. Frequently our greatest successes as students of the world are achieved by climbing out of that world and into our own heads, where our emotional relationship with the physical, and our learned patterns of sensory observation, do not direct or predispose our understanding of the patterns we seek to describe. Without such ability, the astronomy of Copernicus, the mechanics of Newton, the logic of Boole, the special relativity of Einstein, all would have been doomed by the limits of human observation. Even quantum mechanics (the theories that caused Einstein to voice doubt about God’s use of dice), or the self-similar beauty of chaos theory, owe their existence to our ability to find, within those systems, logical consistency and observable pattern which were unnoticeable without indirect, abstract observation. It is often only in the mind that the observer can watch without distraction, and (not incidentally) without disturbing the observed.

The irony of this is that, though the acquisition of knowledge often requires that we leave the physically external and move into the abstractly internal, the goal of that shift is not a personalization of the experience. Quite the contrary: it is an attempt to minimize the presence of self in the process of observation, to “become one” with the logical consistency beneath the limits of perception. Knowledge, then, is most accessible through a transcendence of self, a profound humility, a recognition of the limitations of human senses and perceptive abilities. Both

the process of gaining knowledge, and the knowledge itself, imply a blurring of the primacy of the individual.

Profound humility is a common theme in traditional religion - a humility that ostensibly results from our attempts to compare ourselves to an omnipotent god – the most entrenched and historically consistent (and, as a part of that wonderful word “spiritual,” the most inscrutable) definition of the “box.” However, the entire scope of human knowledge does not require a spiritual entity to inspire, perhaps even to require, a profound humility. We are already dwarfed by the mere size and substance of what can be known, much of which would exist even had we never evolved sufficiently to be self-aware.

In such a context, I define epistemology simply as material or conceptual description, in combination with observed or logically described pattern and associative structuring. To say that I know the process of dissolving solids into liquids means both that I know the relevant characteristics of solids and liquids, and the patterns with which the process we call “dissolve” cause them to interact with each other. It is not enough, or even, perhaps, useful, for me to say that I see the sugar disappear, or that I enjoy the fruits of such a concept in my favorite soft drink – these are personal observations, sensations which are specific to the self, but not specific to the context of “dissolving,” and hence do not help to describe what makes the latter a different observed and patterned event from, say, suspension.

Uniquely human events and experiences (as opposed to the physical and mathematical) add an incredible level of complexity to the process of knowing, a reflection of the complexity of the human mind and social existence. But, nevertheless, without the combination of description and pattern, I cannot be convinced that I know. I cannot say I understand the Vietnam War of the 1960’s without knowing both the associated dates, times and places, and the patterns of social and political action and causation that surrounded them. I cannot say that I know the nature of human sexuality without knowing the interaction of hormones and sex organs, as well as the patterns of mating behavior exhibited and followed by humans while they pay attention to this facet of their existence. As a student of the world, it is certainly possible for me to gain insight into human sexuality by examining my own, but I cannot call what I know “knowledge” unless my knowing is paired with a profound humility, a blurring of the specific in the pursuit of the general. This is how the works of Freud or Piaget are able to reach well beyond the small number of individuals on which their research relied.

If we embrace the primacy of the individual in the expression and acquisition of knowledge - much in vogue today – we take on several risks. First, with the highly specific and personal nature of self-knowing, we risk allowing the individual to simply become another “box” – an inscrutable filter through which attempts at knowing must be realized. We are forced to trust that the “box” will produce something useful and transferable. And second, such a point of view may lull us into thinking that a personal grasp is sufficient, that, even though we have not gained a transferable and generalizable understanding of the focus of our studies, our job is done. Learning becomes, in the words of Freire, an “act of arrogance.”

I often state to students that there are two prerequisites to learning – effective students 1) stop talking long enough to listen, and 2) do not assume they already know everything. If knowledge and excellence are considered primarily an internal, personal process, neither is likely. Listening and learning require that I attempt to be in tune with the patterns and consistencies that underlay observed events and concepts - consistencies that transcend the individual. And it is impossible to recognize this unless we are able to embrace a profound

humility, an appreciation that the knowledge is vaster and more important than the mind that wishes to know it.

Unmasking the Idealist

It is difficult to determine the impact of this point of view on curriculum design. Despite my affection for the quantitative and the logical consistency inherent in the structure of science and mathematics, I do not define knowledge strictly in those terms. However, a qualitative approach to research and knowledge inspire my natural skepticism, since it is easy for such to appear inscrutable, marginal, “spiritual,” *i.e.*, – the “box.” Additionally, I am concerned that a fascination with the subjective and the personal may, at best, cause us to wander, and at worst threaten the very connections we are attempting to discover. This places my philosophy most strongly with those of the idealist – I am a believer in a consistent underlying logic to all knowledge. Our description of this logic is inevitably incomplete, perhaps even obscure, but the limitation of vision is ours. The inside of the box is available to us, if we’ll only listen.

However, with this historical approach to education comes a host of potential ills. First, it often lends credence to the more assured and vocal amongst us. The promoter of the dominant culture is certain that within the successes of his/her cultural history lay the fabric of true knowledge. The proselytizer (religious or otherwise) needs no further encouragement either. Other pretenders to the throne include behaviorists and some of the other so-called social scientists, politically powerful or popular special interests, and, frequently, educational reformers. If we declare the existence of an ideal, we often simply encourage the self-righteous to hoist their flag, to declare that the battle is won.

There is no easy way out of this malaise. But a teacher’s trust of his own understanding of the underlying connectedness of his discipline will go a long way to reigning in the excesses. As an example, one can define the goal of learning fine writing from several ideals – the ideal of consistent language usage as well as the ideal of diverse cultural representation; the ideal of historical consistency as well as the ideal of minority voice; and the ideal of exposition as well as the ideal of personal narrative. All have a right to exist, but establishing the *connectedness* of these writing styles is the primary responsibility of a classroom teacher. It is, in fact, the classroom teacher who can best recognize and resolve this, and it is difficult for me to imagine that any observer from the outside will be able to improve on a teacher’s clear understanding of the process of writing, paired with a good sense of a class’s various shortcomings and foibles. Although I view a deconstruction of the above-mentioned “assured and vocal” singularities of curricular purpose as useful and instructive, such a process is, at best, tangential to the issues facing educators and their charges. At worst it embroils teachers and students in a battle in which they have no interest, and cannot win.

Of course, the process of defining curricular content becomes very much easier in math and science, where there’s a logical consistency and connectedness that can be established largely outside of the complexities of human behavior. There are very good reasons why humans of different languages and cultures may disagree on how best to describe snow, but have no problem agreeing on when it will turn into water. For such instruction, the decisions of a teacher properly grounded in his or her discipline are even less controversial. In general, it is more important for a teacher to provide contact and exposure to the discipline than to attempt to establish each individual student’s place within it. If s/he is able to encourage a sense of profound humility in the face of the vastness of any body of knowledge, students will go out of their way to construct a place in it for themselves. It is not possible, nor is it even advisable, for

the teacher to attempt to establish that relationship for them. Constructing and implementing the curriculum consists primarily of finding those material or conceptual observations, establishing the patterned fabric by which they are connected, and modeling a sense of awe as a natural part of the human relationship to that process. The rest is up to the learner.

The second problem with the historical roots of idealism has to do with the nature of character development. This process is, by definition, personal – it cries out for the selection of a non-controversial ideal towards which to strive, or an exemplary life which one can emulate. Historically, an idealist finds the process of defining the civic responsibilities of an American relatively easy – others, less so. However, again, I resolve this conflict through the embracing of one of the primary tenets of this treatise – the concept of profound humility. I have no desire to promote the idea of sublimation to a hero, to a powerful scholar or thinker, or any other concept of the ideal *human*. I do feel in awe of the heroic, the thoughtful, and the ideal. But even this approach begs the point.

We all have a responsibility to study the self, the nature of being human, but it is a profound mistake to say that that is what we do in schools. Our ability to understand mathematics, physics, astronomy, even history and literature, is doomed if it *presupposes* an ability to define and understand ourselves. It is certainly helpful to identify ourselves, as much as we can, in the writings of Shakespeare and Langston Hughes and Mao and Kant and Plato. But to define such writings as important parts of the body of human knowledge is to state that they transcend the needs or abilities of a single individual, that their works still stand tall in the face of an observer who sees them from a place of profound humility. It is our responsibility to place students in as close a proximity as possible to the logical consistencies, as best as we can currently describe them, that define our world. If they can recognize it, reflect it, and are in awe of it, then our job is done.

The third difficulty with the historical traditions of idealism has to do with the aesthetic. Idealists often define great art as great works, or the works of great artists – a concept that has much appeal for me, just as does the objective and quantifiable nature of science and mathematics - if it were only possible. As a musical composer in my own right, it has been very difficult to balance a sense of the ideal with the culturally expedient yet massively powerful field of popular music. An interest in musical construction, and the development of musical ideas and expression in the context of historical development, is all but lost as CD sales and impossible-to-define terms such as “cool” and “hip” dominate perceived excellence. The same can be said for the visual artists, as computer-manipulation of images becomes a skill with a great deal more currency than the ability to construct any original image from scratch. In the arena of the artistic, our relationship with the so-called Eurocentric classical tradition has truly been deconstructed, but the results are even more culturally specific, more unreflective of individual expression, more entrenched in the pursuit of the consistent and the banal than the so-called classical tradition it intends to replace.

Unfortunately, this is a personal rather than a philosophical problem, and I find no clear answers. From a curricular point of view, the only defense is a retreat to the skill-sets. As much as it appeals, we should not be in the business of defining an ideal mode of expression, but it is not difficult to describe differences in an artist’s ability to manipulate his/her own medium. The ability to control color, to define texture, to lead and impact the eye – these can be made ideal, and can be addressed and assessed. “Great works,” in this context, serve not to define what is aesthetically successful, but what is technically so. As in character education, our responsibility to developing artists is one of exposure – to other visions and contexts, but, more importantly, to

media and the tools of self-expression, and to an awed respect for the accomplishments of other artists and the range of available possibilities. A true student of the arts will find his/her own voice with little more encouragement than that.

Idealism in education is not sufficiently served by mere proximity. As educators, we should not be content to hope that placing a Harley in the proximity of our charges will allow them to understand the next motorcycle that they experience. We must show them how we know whether a motorcycle does well at what motorcycles are expected to do. We must be able to describe its ability to start, to run, to corner, to accelerate, to brake, to keep doing these things over time, and to do them without needless cost or concern. We must also be able to explain how the associated qualities of a motorcycle come together in a way that is powerfully unique, and yet connected to the same forces that appear in other places. And, most importantly, we must instill in our charges a sense that “motorcycle-ness,” though logical and accessible, still deserves our respect and awe - that the process of unraveling its many connections is worthy of our attention, since it is bigger than the limited manner in which we, as humble humans, are able to experience it. And if we can't explain this, they surely won't get it.