

## **Educating the Will**

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Learning may be defined as a more or less permanent change in understanding and behaviour. It is in this respect a process of habituation, which is essential if we are going to be able to attend to what is newly given. Aristotle affirmed the fundamental importance of habit in the formation of character. So did Rousseau, in his steadfast conviction that the greater part of education of the young requires keeping them out of the way of social practices that would habituate them to vice, instead trusting the child's unfolding nature to learn from things alone: children learn only through experience (conceived in Lockean terms) and emotions. We often describe those habits of which we disapprove as prejudices, deep-seated affective and cognitive predilections, "prior to judgement". We have learned from Gadamer, however, that the Enlightenment "prejudice against prejudice" is untenable, as understanding depends on fore-structures that open us up to its possibility; at the same time, prejudgements are revisable in a hermeneutic encounter, much as Piaget proposes that accommodation as well as assimilation are necessary for equilibrium. I wish to explore one important and often overlooked element in the recognition and revision of unworthy prejudices, an element that is crucial to a biblical view of humanness, namely, the will.

### *The Significance of the Will*

Rousseau challenged the conventional education of his times as the learning of words and symbols in lieu of engagement with the objects signified, but his insistence that what is most important for learning is the *desire* to learn was also a significant infusion into the Western educational tradition. Western schooling has long emphasised intellectual development, but the importance of affectivity has increasingly been recognised, in those educational currents often pejoratively described as "progressive". Thus, the nature of the interplay between cognition and desire remains contentious.

As I have suggested, often absent from a consideration of this relationship is the conception owed to Augustine's appropriation of the Judeo-Christian notion of the *will*, by which persons *commit* to actions they consider to be of value. While we now take this feature of humanness for

granted, so that it common to read it back into earlier writers – most notably, in the translation of the Aristotelian “*proairesis*” – it is important to consider the differences between Augustine and Aristotle in this respect. Both intended to address the issue of choice, the capacity to affirm or deny as not a matter of habit or prejudice and compelled neither by logic nor by passion but as the basis of free human action; but Augustine’s conception is a significant advance on Aristotle’s.

From Plato’s intellectualist perspective, wrongdoing occurs only out of ignorance and knowledge thus entails virtue. Aristotle could not accept this contention, and he coined the term *proairesis* to describe a space between knowledge and action in which a choice or decision can be made, thus escaping from the presumably deterministic forces of reason *and* desire. *Proairesis* is conceived as a hybrid of reason and desire, as either “desiderative thought” or “intellectual desire” (Aristotle, 1984, p. 1799).

Aristotle did not transcend this bivalent conception. Augustine’s understanding is not only more comprehensive, drawing together many themes in philosophical and theological thinking, but is significantly stimulated by the Apostle Paul (Arendt, 1977; Sorabji, 2000). In accord with *Romans 7*, undergirding Augustinian “will” is the basic biblical category of *sin* and the resultant struggle between spirit and flesh which permeates the integral soul-and-body person; it is a category unavailable to Classical thinkers. Hannah Arendt goes so far as to describe this “discovery of the Will” as “the wondrous fact of a freedom that none of the ancient peoples ... had been aware of ... that there is a faculty in man by virtue of which, regardless of necessity or compulsion, he can say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’” (1977, p. 68). This capacity marks us as “purposeful creatures,” able (relatively speaking, of course) to chart the course of our lives.

In *On the Trinity*, Augustine suggests that the mind comprises three distinct yet inseparable parts: Memory, Intellect and Will. The Will is the executive function, directing “the memory what to retain and what to forget ... [and] the intellect what to choose for its understanding” (Arendt, 1977, p. 99). Whether or not one adopts this precise view of the structure of knowing, one faces the question, “What holds the reins?” For Plato (1953), reason guided the chariot, mediating the competing forces of the spirited horse striving for honour and esteem and the appetitive one motivated by food, drink, and sex. If, however, the will is in control, education of the will rather than reason should be paramount, seeking to evoke in students a purposeful

response in service of God. As purposive beings, deciding what we most value and what gives deepest meaning to our lives, we are pervasively informed by our thoughts and feelings – but there is more to us than these.

How then might be the best way to educate the will? Pedagogies directed toward predetermined outcomes stifle the capacity for responsive choice. IN contrast, the increasingly popular notion of “backward design”, for example, invites students pursuing goals established by the teacher to do so by exploring “essential questions” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). If curriculum as a design for teaching and learning is focused on essential *questions* rather than essential *answers*, it is an invitation that opens up a space for responsiveness. These questions will need to be divergent rather than convergent if they are to encourage deep understanding. As Wiggins and McTighe note, the focus should not be on covering particular content but on what *learnings* we will seek from students engaging with this content. Backward design starts with explicit learning goals and understandings, but the instructional route to these is guided by essential questions enabling students to “uncover” the content (Ted Sizer’s emphasis, originally), rather than racing to “cover the curriculum”.

### *Levels of Teaching*

Morris Bigge (1982) , in his classic *Learning Theories for Teachers*, identifies four “levels of teaching” that flow from differing conceptions in educational psychology. We may leave “autonomous development” aside, as it is basically a commitment to non-teaching. Bigge suggests that the second, memory-level teaching, bears little relationship to the capacity for intelligent behaviour; yes, the ability to memorise material is necessary, but it is by no means sufficient. Explanatory-level teaching can make a contribution to intelligent behaviour, but it will be very limited if students are basically passive and it is the teacher who is the active agent doing the explaining. (As Ralph Tyler, guru of behavioural objectives, famously if unexpectedly said, it is not what the teacher does, but what students do, that they learn.)

The first three levels flow from a view of humans as instinctive or reactive organisms; the fourth level sees them as called to purposeful response. Exploratory teaching involves a reflective or questioning approach, in which teachers believe that “the quality and quantity of what students come to know, think, and do are inseparable from how their learning is acquired”. In such teaching, students learn how to go about the process of problem-solving itself. Not everything

that texts or teachers describe as a problem is necessarily so: often these are merely artificial intellectual “exercises” designed to test skills or recall – habits – problematic only within the rules of the game itself. Instead, students should be faced not only with a question they cannot immediately answer, but with a problem “so compelling that [they] really want to study it but not so overwhelming that they are prone to give up” (Bigge, pp. 312-18).

Real problems stimulate emotional and intellectual engagement, neither of which is to be gainsaid. However, while empathy and sound argumentation based on reliable evidence are essential elements motivating decisions, also required are approaches inviting choices, willingly made. If we are to honour others – human and non-human – we must be always open to their particularity, rather regarding them merely as instances of this or that category. Each person is uniquely created in the image of God; and each creature must be approached on its own terms, treated with integrity. The other is thus inherently mysterious, posing complex, concrete problems.

#### *Educating for Religio-Critical Commitment*

Christian educators will wish to encourage students to evaluate possible responses to others in terms of their deepest convictions. A primary goal should be facilitating critical awareness (and thus possible revision) of fundamental convictions – prejudices – and their concrete implications, and the making of choices in accordance with these. My long-time colleague, Stuart Fowler, coined the term “religio-criticism” for this process, for a person’s deepest commitment is to a source of order and meaning: it is a *religious* commitment rooted in the heart or will.

How then do we educate people to choose to do what is right, not in the abstract but in a given situation? A few years ago I taught a capstone Education course with a focus on social justice to a group of predominantly middle-class, White college students, who were also, in the main, professing Christians. Many found it impossible to believe that African-American or Hispanic students would not have the same opportunities as they did to make a good life for themselves and their families. No matter the historical, sociological, or statistical evidence, they were convinced that a person’s plight had little to do with ethnicity, socio-economic status, educational opportunity, or other environmental affordances. The few who were willing to believe the evidence were those who had spent some time on teaching rounds in schools that were largely Black or Hispanic or in voluntary work with such children. They remembered the

frustration and anger they had felt – yes, affect is important indeed – and the empathy that they had learned in such situations. Similarly, Nicholas Wolterstorff (2004; 2006) recounts that it was not until he had met face to face with Palestinians and Black South Africans that his intellectual misgivings were transformed into empathy, which became the wellspring for action.

Empathy evidently has a significant affective dimension, but there is more to it than this. It requires an intellectual, imaginative, but ultimately *willing* identification with another. Thoughts and feelings are not enough; there must be a *decision* to act in favour of the other, for empathy to be genuine.

### *A model for teaching and learning*

The curricular and pedagogical model I have developed over the course of my career goes by the shorthand of *play, problem-posing and purposeful response* (grounded in a conception of the rhythm of learning – coming to know – as one of *immersion, withdrawal and return*) (Blomberg, 2007; Stronks & Blomberg, 1993). It is as much a model for learning and teaching as it is for subject-matter – the latter better construed as *subject-manner*, when it has been pedagogically transformed (in Lee Shulman’s terms) by the teacher. The goal of such a curricular model is the “getting of wisdom” as the *realisation of value*, with “realisation” bearing the dual sense of active understanding and actualising (Maxwell, 1984). This is not a restatement of the theory-into-practice paradigm that has dominated Western education (and approaches in the South and East that are modelled on it), but an alternative to it. As close as the notion of praxis, as a merging of theory and practice, comes to this conception of wisdom, wisdom seeks not merely to merge but to transcend these categories.

In its first phase, primary sources (and certainly not just texts) are central. It requires an experiential encounter, which will necessarily have physico-sensory dimensions but is never limited to these. In the phase of learning from *things*, Rousseau somewhat surprisingly mandates *Robinson Crusoe* for Emile’s reading; I take it that this is because Rousseau recognises that texts that engage linguistically, ethically, religiously etc., have their locus in “concrete experience”. Thus it should be that learners engage the other at first hand or vicariously, certainly not at one remove, through abstract systematisations or textbook summarisations of particulars. This I describe as “play”.

Second, experience poses problems to the learner requiring resolution and the learner consciously poses problems to this experience. Of course, this means we are all and always learners. This terminology of “problem-posing” is owed to Paulo Freire, but as in Freire’s conception, problems are not purely or even primarily intellectual or analytical; they may be ethical, aesthetic, fiduciary, juridical, etc. Freire was expelled from Brazil because his adult literacy programs evoked highly personal and practical political issues as people were becoming empowered to recognise and address (realise) these, constituting what I have termed “purposeful response”.

### *Project-based Learning*

A pedagogical approach long known as “problem-based learning” has in the past few years emerged in the guise of “project based learning”. In the United States, it has been closely associated with High Tech High in San Diego and the Buck Institute for Education; it has been enthusiastically adopted by Christian schools in Ontario and elsewhere in Canada and is similar to the approach that characterised the K-12 community-governed school in which I worked for many years. The Buck Institute identifies the following “essential elements” in PBL:

- **Significant Content** - At its core, the project is focused on teaching students important knowledge and skills, derived from standards and key concepts at the heart of academic subjects.
- **21st century competencies** - Students build competencies valuable for today’s world, such as critical thinking/problem solving, collaboration, and communication, and creativity/ innovation, which are taught and assessed.
- **In-Depth Inquiry** - Students are engaged in a rigorous, extended process of asking questions, using resources, and developing answers.
- **Driving Question** - Project work is focused by an open-ended question that students understand and find intriguing, which captures their task or frames their exploration.
- **Need to Know** - Students see the need to gain knowledge, understand concepts, and apply skills in order to answer the Driving Question and create project products, beginning with an Entry Event that generates interest and curiosity.
- **Voice and Choice** - Students are allowed to make some choices about the products to be created, how they work, and how they use their time, guided by the teacher and depending on age level and PBL experience.

- **Revision and Reflection** - The project includes processes for students to use feedback to consider additions and changes that lead to high-quality products, and think about what and how they are learning.
- **Public Audience** - Students present their work to other people, beyond their classmates and teacher. ([http://bie.org/about/what\\_pbl](http://bie.org/about/what_pbl))

King Middle School in Portland, Maine has for two decades conducted what it terms “expeditionary learning projects” – extended periods of work outside the confines of the classroom, envisaging schools, we might say, as “learning headquarters” rather than “teaching fortress”. King curriculum coordinator David Grant has devised the following rubric for project design:

- Step 1: Develop a compelling topic that covers state standards, has an authentic connection to the local community, and provides opportunities for every student to do meaningful, independent research.
- Step 2: Develop or design a comprehensive final product that each student will have a role in creating, and could be used by local residents or professionals in the field.
- Step 3: Involve professional organizations and professionals from the community to connect the academic study with the real world, and have students assume these professional roles during the expedition so they get a sense of what it would mean to be professionally engaged in meaningful work.
- Step 4: Identify and organize the major learning resources for the expedition, and make sure they're available....
- Step 5: Coordinate calendars.... Expeditions are interdisciplinary and require a lot of planning to ensure that each piece flows smoothly from one to the next. They require enough time for each component to be done well, for students to get time in the field, for experts to come in at the appropriate place, and for the final product to be high quality.
- Step 6: Plan a final experience or culminating event. Showcase student work to the public or outside of school. (<http://www.edutopia.org/stw-maine-project-based-learning-six-steps-planning>)

I have included these principles and practices to illustrate how learning might be organised to engage students with complex, multi-dimensional, real-life problems in which they are confronted with and allowed to take responsibility for meaningful judgements and decisions. Whereas such projects have been characterised as interdisciplinary, I prefer to think of them as pre- or trans-disciplinary. That is to say, rather than starting with a range of disciplines – experience that has been rationally organised, or rationalised – and seeking ways in which to integrate them around a theme, the starting point is an integral “chunk” of experience, as Israel Scheffler would say.

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