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A Thinking Education

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Abstract

In this revised keynote address, given at the University of Alberta Faculty of Education Graduate Students' Research Forum, the author explores what might constitute a thinking education through contrasting such with identified impediments to thinking in the public place of schooling. To do so the author draws off key distinctions in the works of Hannah Arendt (e.g., between labour, work, and action) and Gert Biesta (e.g., between schooling aims for qualification, socialization, and what might be educational) along with the support of insights about thinking from Alain Badiou. While thinking, like love, may be untimely, they are truly educational as they invite us to re-cognize our relations to others in ways that encourage us to become more than that we have been socialized to believe.



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Thank you for the invitation to be with you today. I am honored. I see that the title of today's gathering is "thinking education." I want to title my talk "A thinking education," identify some questions that might support such and address some impediments to a thinking education I see in the very way we, presently, think about education. But first, let me share with you an event that put me on my way to thinking about a thinking education.

Years ago, I was teaching a senior education class with 30 bright students. At that time, I had this notion of 'dangerous teaching'. This was an approach to teaching based on the assertion that what we need in schools is not more or so called 'new/innovative' content but another kind of self-knowledge that might emerge when we challenge the curricular knowledge already present and in what students and teachers bring to their encounter with each other (den Heyer, 2008). That particular class I laid out my argument, connected that to the readings for the day, and stopped to ask the class, "So, might you one day be dangerous teachers?" One particularly bright student who had shared that she had a very successful high school career and had won scholarships to the university finally spoke, "Look, when I was in school I just wanted to know what I needed to know. I didn't want to have to think about it." Several of her classmates started giggling at the comment, but I said, "This is an insightful comment about schooling, let's follow this up." So I asked something like, "Well, what do you see as the difference between knowing and thinking?" Frowning and getting frustrated, she replied, "Yes, but Kent, if we have students think all day, when will we get anything done?"

So here was a smart and articulate senior education student who helped the class get to a core insight regarding the lived differences between schooling and education and between getting things done and thinking.¹

In many ways my scholarship since has been a response to this student's insights and have led me to a few questions (amongst others) I want to share with you in support of a thinking education.

1. If the time of teaching is not always the time of learning, how might we design assessments as the opportunity for students to take pride in their work?
2. In what ways might teachers open up our pedagogy and curriculum so that what students may think about extends beyond the near horizon of what we can reasonably claim to know?
3. Finally, what is educational about education that is distinct from schooling's qualification and socialization rationales evident in whatever past or contemporary State in the world you care to examine (Biesta & Safstrom 2011)?

I will address here this final question but hope to spark some thought about the previous two.

Gert Biesta (2010) notes that the notion of the public in the Euro-American tradition carries a public expectation that teachers and schools work with students towards two distinct but interrelated aims, "qualification" and "socialization." Many expect schools to qualify students for public private competency, ranging from acquiring numeracy and literacy to specific training for a particular skill to the habits useful for future employment (e.g., arriving punctually for work-class). *Qualification* thus tends to link the schooling system to economic justifications for

¹ I am also curious as to what you think that student referred when she said we would not be able to get 'anything done' if we teachers had students think all day?

public funding. A second and overlapping function, *socialization*, involves initiating students into existing dominant orders of thought and comportment ranging from ways of speaking and behaving to disciplinary “ways of knowing” that are held by some to be necessary for effective citizenship (e.g., thinking like a historian or scientist). Such initiation can be judged as positive or negative, intentional or unintentional, depending on who does the judging. Beyond these two expectations for schooling everywhere and through time, I think, however, that we need to ask, ‘what is educational about education?’ For me this is a crucial question and one most of us have left behind in our journey to the present given the impediments we face today thinking about the educational.

Impediments to a thinking education

The Neoliberal Drivet to Prepare Kids for Life Rather than Prepare Kids for The World

Arendt’s (1958/1998) distinction between life and world is important here. For life, schooling focuses on job readiness and the animal business of maintaining our biological life rather than the world shared amongst and between humans and in need of continual repair through our attentive presence. This is the difference between what Arendt’s calls *labour*, what we need to do to maintain our animal lives such as planting or buying food, and *work*, what we do to build shared lives as humans – a *world* – such as trade, set up schools and hospitals, and, between *work* and what she calls *action*.

By action, Arendt names that interaction between people talking about a pressing political question. Action involves people doing what is unexpected: Interrupting their routine and private activities to engage in discourse, and, through doing so, people create a place where a public can form. But it is not creating a place that counts as action (that is product of work). It is, however, only in this place that agents can continuously rearticulate their thoughts as *actions* in conjunction with that of others that constitute the political realm. In doing so, we potentially become more than what we have been socialized to believe about ourselves: “Our freedom and subjectivity are therefore not to be found outside of the web of plurality; they only exist within it” (Biesta, 2010, pp. 84–85).

And it is this potential freedom only available through a public sphere that neoliberals find abhorrent. The story they believe says that all that is public should be private, that the political should be reduced to a controlled set of individual consumer choices, and that the good life is itself a private affair.

Where this story reigns we have become individual nodes in a global circuitry of neoliberal imaginaries and screens onto which commercially mediated messages project (e.g., check out what appears as advertisements on your facebook based on your recent google search queries). Socially, formerly blank places on private capital’s map (including the internet itself) have now been commercialized, from hockey rink boards in the late 1980s to the neon signs along Edmonton’s Gateway Boulevard today welcoming you to the city and to take a trip to the spa. Likewise, our legislative assemblies have become agencies to reduce any impediment to capital’s flow, most notably in the currents that take our political leaders and their advisors to and fro between jobs in government and the corporate board.

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The pace of human thinking, sharing, and deliberation cannot compete with this rushing speed of images or money. Perhaps, that is why so many today everywhere this story reigns are sick or suffering of the mind and, or body; for without a public place where we can engage each other and prompt each other to thinking about that which we do not yet know, we can only but feel dis-ease. The symptoms of this disease are everywhere to be seen, from the legal drugging of millions of our school children to the rise of atavistic neo-fascist leaders near and far around the world.

Here, under the reign of this story, the classroom as a potential place of *action* is under constant attack to become even more standardized and beholding not to each who is present but to the arbitrary designation of qualification standards set by status quo functionaries. This is sophistry and we perhaps today live in the greatest age of sophistry the world has known. Preparing kids to be workers for the 21st century economy and the emergence of “life-skills” programs in public schools are two of many examples of sophistry’s *raison d’être*.

Our Focus On Education as an Epistemological Rather than an Ontological Question.

Our mainstream education history and the one still haunting us presently assumes that education is an epistemological problem that we can solve when we with finally get our objectives and techniques right and our assessments standardized, straight, and valid (in the narrow statistical sense of the word). The question that has historically dominated formal curriculum leading to our epistemological focus is, ‘what is most worth knowing?’ This question as a guide should be abandoned as quickly as possible given the fact that no one can even say *what is not worth knowing* for every kid in this or that political jurisdiction (den Heyer, 2009).

What happens when we change our educational focus to a basic question regarding our assumptions in play about who we think – ontologically – we humans are? Is there a human nature for example? What capacities are all humans potentially capable of expressing? What is our relationship to the non-human world, from the menstrual moon to the innumerable microbes in our guts with whom we have evolved for 10s of thousands of years? And ontologically, what is and therefore should be our relationship to the earth, the very humus of our being and from which we English speakers derive, from Latin, humans and humility.

In short, switching the essential educational questions from epistemology to ontology allows us to ask ‘who do we, teachers and students, think we might become through our study together?’

Motivation Talk

We need to stop speaking about motivation and about motivating kids either from external to internal and other relatively useless distinctions. Rather the educational speaks for intention and willfulness, that of being seized by a seemingly intractable problem or of some terrible beauty that demands our energetic attention; why, for example, the steps on this trail failed to survive the winter to why trade treaties are negotiated in private without a public hearing (e.g., the Trans Pacific Partnership). Here, the ontological and animation, not motivation, come together.

What does motivation have to do with for example falling in love? When we fall in love, what are falling from and into what are we falling? There are many responses to this question. For me, thinking ontologically about what a thinking education might be, I think when we fall in love we are falling from the illusion that we are a singular being, self contained and autonomous. Rather we fall into a relational reality where there is no ‘O/one’ but rather only a multiple of equally existing actualities and potentialities. That me – Kent – while a proper noun is not a one but a multiple of multiples within a multiple of relations (human and other), a realization I can only come to think about through falling into a love that shatters everything I had had planned for that day and the days to follow (den Heyer, 2009b). Indeed, such an *event* shatters everything I had been taught about individuality as a separated independent entity from my ecosystemic reality, a teaching that seems to me to be at the core of our neoliberal psychosis.

Now, everything is changed. Now, what I thought I was or thought about the world no longer either makes sense or animates me. Now, I must ask, ‘given this event of falling in love, or being seized by a conundrum that defies my habitual sense making, about what and with whom must I now faithfully think?’ Like love as an event, we are now confronted with the question and task of “fidelity” which is when, for Alain Badiou (2001), the question of ethics, and I argue, the educational, begins: “A crisis of fidelity is always what puts to the test, following the collapse of an image, the sole maxim of consistency (and thus ethics): Keep going!”

There is always only one question in the ethic of truths: how will I, as some-one, continue to exceed my own being? How will I link the things I know, in a consistent fashion, via the effects of being seized by the not-known? (Badiou, 2001, p. 50).

Let us therefore speak of animation not motivation and of our ontological premises regarding human being and becoming rather than epistemological shadow games and parlor tricks that only serve to sell books about the newest innovative techniques of information and opinion management in the service of the status quo.

Intelligence Talk

This point above links to my final point regarding the ways many of us do not think well enough about a thinking education. *As with motivation, we – teachers, students, parents, all of us – should never again speak of or about intelligence* when we speak about our youth or ourselves. Intelligence, its measurement, its possession – who has it and who does not – is a fool’s game birthed like a two headed serpent out of the so-called science of eugenics and Euro-American Empire (Winfield, 2007).

Would we talk about the potential of falling in love as a matter of intelligence? Could any parent believe that it is only reserved for their one child, but not the other, who scores above 95 on some test? Does love care to what family you belong, did it matter to Romeo & Juliet? Does it matter whether you are in the Dash 1 stream (academic) or Dash 2 (non-academic)? No. Let us instead think along with Alain Badiou (2001) and his insight about an ethic of truths premised on “the strong, simple idea that every existence can one day be seized by what happens to it and subsequently devote itself to that which is valid for all...” (p. 66). Indeed, this fact of our lives is why many of us sit here together today.

So, to return to my title, ‘a thinking education.’ We can say that one response to the question regarding what is educational about education is a kind of thinking that lies outside our

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horizon and beyond the getting “anything done” logic that has something to do I suspect with our culture’s sickly narrow demands for schooling to be only about qualification and socialization aims and rationales. This is a thinking that requires we teachers recognize that today’s formal programs of study are sophistic neoliberal political projects that require uncovering as such so as to promote a place with our students where we may come to *re-cognize* our lives through the action that is thinking together. To be clear, it is not that qualification and socialization aims are not necessary (and which are, by the way, largely taken care of through influences outside of the classroom such as the family, community, and media). Rather, it is to suggest that they are totally insufficient if we teachers hope our work can be a kind (of) education that approximates our sugary ideals and mission statements about such.

The challenge is that we must have humility in this enterprise for we can no more schedule thinking for our students any more than we can schedule when we will fall in love. On this point Arendt was concise:

The new always happens against the over-whelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle... Like action... in the language of natural science, it is the “infinite improbability which occurs regularly.” (Arendt, 1958/1998, pp. 178, 246)

Thinking is untimely in this way, but also in another way that defies our assessment schedules and untimely that when it happens we leave the time of chronos and enter a time of Now; when, to borrow from the poet Robert Frost’s comment about happiness, we enter a time not of length but of height.

Many challenges work against thinking in schools and beyond that encourage us not to bother with the uncertainty, the alienation, and the simple difficulty of thinking; “Just tell me what I need to know, I do not want to have to think about it” is what many of our most successful students today learn.

There are also dangers we must avoid; to mistake what we have to come to think as the only way to think about something and that anyone who thinks differently must submit to our version of love or thought or an image of good teaching. Recall the mythological figure of Procrustes who forced guests to fit his guest bed through the tortures of stretching or amputation (den Heyer & van Kessel, 2015). No one ever exactly fit, including Procrustes when he was captured and forced by Theseus to be ‘fitted’ according to the dimensions of his own bed.

Our contemporary time and history is full of examples of such evil by people who themselves were not evil but who just thought very, very badly. Or, who in fact did not really ‘think’ at all. In this regard, I cite Judith Butler rendering of a central lesson from Arendt’s book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A report of the banality of evil*:

Indeed, her indictment of Eichmann reached beyond the man to the historical world in which true thinking was vanishing and, as a result, crimes against humanity became increasingly “thinkable.” The degradation of thinking worked hand in hand with the systematic destruction of populations. (Butler, 2011, para. 10).

Arendt offers us some wisdom from personally witnessing the trial and the man and the recounting of his historical circumstances:

The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal (Arendt, 1963/2006, p. 276).

The crime? “I just wanted to know what I needed to know. I didn’t want to have to think about it.”

Coda

“The great aim of education is not knowledge but action.”

— Herbert Spencer

Action, thinking with Arendt, requires honoring all our relations and recognizing that we can only become through our inter-action that in turn requires that teachers, despite all discouragements, endeavor to save themselves from being mere functionaries of the State or the state of unthinking that is accepting without critique, and thus action, ‘just the way things are’. To become more than this is only possible because teachers have students in their care, students waiting to help and engage in the potential of turning the classroom space into a place of becoming.

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