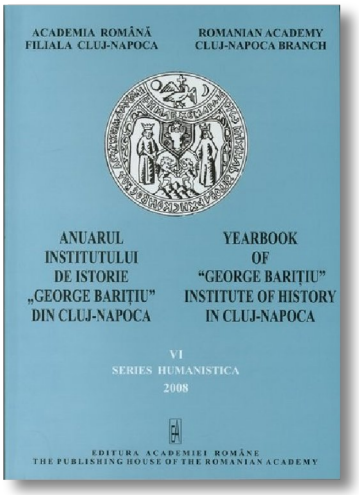

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STUDENT-INITIATED CURRICULA: A CORNERSTONE OF LEARNING FOR DEMOCRACY

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Abstract. *This paper addresses the practical problem: 'How can we encourage democracy?' The author proposes the development of student-initiated curricula as part of the solution. Her argument, which draws on a Popperian evolutionary epistemology, includes an analysis of the relationship between learning, teaching and democracy. Conventional curricula – initiated and devised by government, local education authorities and teachers – are criticised on the grounds that, generally, they embody mistaken assumptions about learning, are a form of tyranny (despite benign intent) and fail to foster the development of learner autonomy (an integral feature of learning for democracy).*

1. **INTRODUCTION**[1]

In this paper I address the following practical problem: 'How can we encourage democracy?' The solution I propose – though I am not suggesting that it is a complete solution – is that of student-initiated curricula. By student-initiated curricula I mean programmes of learning designed to address students' learning problems, as conceived and formulated by the students themselves.

Such programmes of learning contrast with curricula initiated and imposed by, for example, government, local education authorities and teachers. This latter type of curricula is the norm within formal education worldwide. Indeed, many people cannot imagine a school or education system in which students initiate the content of their formal learning. The suggestion that the widespread development of student-initiated curricula would be a good thing is often met with incredulity. Worse, proponents of student-initiated curricula are frequently regarded as heretics.

[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented at *Marxism and Education: Renewing Dialogues VI – Realms of Freedom: Struggles, Alternatives and Agency in Education*, a day seminar held in the School of Education Foundations and Policy Studies, University of London Institute of Education, Wednesday 4th May 2005.

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But a number of arguments support the development of student-initiated curricula (Burgess, 1977; Swann, 1999, 2006, 2007a). Here I will focus on one, the idea that by not making a commitment to the development of student-initiated curricula, teachers and schools are inhibiting democracy.

2. **DEMOCRACY**

Democracy can be construed in many ways. One way is to see it as a means of protecting an open society[2]. An open society, as conceived by Karl Popper, is one in which the idea that 'I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort, we may get nearer to the truth' (Popper, 1966[1945], p. 225) is made manifest in the practices of its members and in the organisation and structures of its institutions.

In an open society the conjectural nature of knowledge is recognised, and no person or group has a supreme right to determine what is to be construed as good, true or valid[3]. Criticism and diversity are both highly valued, so too is freedom of access to information. Decision-making and decision-taking are addressed in the spirit of openness; different options are proposed, listened to and considered. Fundamental disagreements will occur, of course, and decisions may have to be taken without consensus. But in a society that is democratic there will be formal procedures for limiting and curtailing the power of key decision-makers and decision-takers – that is, the society's leaders – without having to resort to violence or coercion. Members of a society may wish to utilise these procedures if their leaders exercise their vested power badly or fail to meet positive expectations.

In general, the concepts of an open society and democracy are two key resources to which we can refer when attempting to organise our social institutions and conduct the business of our groups, communities and countries in such a way that skirmishing, tyranny and bullying are reduced (Swann, 2005). A third key resource is our advanced facility for learning.

[2] This is not to say that all democracies are entirely open or that all open societies are democratic.

[3] A relativistic view of truth is not implied here. Rather, following Popper (1972[1963], 1979[1972]), I propose that truth should operate as a regulative ideal, as a standard at which to aim. Although we can pursue truth, we can never know whether we have reached our goal. Popperians eschew the idea that the growth of knowledge resides in the accumulation of justified true beliefs. Instead, the aim is to challenge, develop and perhaps overthrow some of our existing, flawed or limited expectations. What is provisionally and pragmatically accepted as true or good is not decided by an appeal to so-called confirming evidence, personal status, popularity, religion, political group, or state. The 'authority', insofar as there is one, is that of argument. But any argument, however good it may seem to be at present, may later be overturned by the discovery of new facts and the development of new ideas and arguments.

3. INVALID ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT DEMOCRACY

I wish to challenge three common assumptions about democratic organisations, institutions and governments.

First, it is often assumed that once created, the most significant threat to a democracy is from those who express a distaste for it – the 'enemies' of democracy. This assumption is not only mistaken (see, for example, Codd, 2005) but also dangerous in that it encourages complacency and a lack of active and critical engagement within an established democracy.

The second invalid assumption is that democracy can be imposed from without. This assumption tempts people to adopt short cuts to democracy that do not take account of the particular circumstances. Democracy requires habits of political and social action that have to be learned and can only develop over a period of time. And, of course, the idea of imposing democracy is a contradiction in terms.

The third invalid assumption is that democracy is a matter of suffrage. This assumption is damaging because it provides the basis for the other two. It is important to remember that voting is just a tool to facilitate decision-making. There can be voting without democracy and democracy without voting – in the forum type of democracy decisions may be made by all members of the group on the basis of open discussion and without recourse to a vote.

These invalid assumptions limit the development and promotion of democratic processes. In particular, they add weight to the fallacious idea that teaching for democracy is a matter of training people to adopt specific roles[4].

4. LEARNING

Drawing on evolutionary epistemology, it can be argued that learning is what takes place when an individual develops new expectations – conscious and unconscious – that are not purely an outcome of genetic inheritance or random mutation (Swann, 2003b, 2007a, 2007b, 2008). Significantly, changes in expectation are accompanied by changes in what the individual is capable of experiencing and in her or his potential responses to the environment – what she or he is capable of doing and is inclined to do. Generally speaking, we are inclined to develop new expectations when engaged in some kind of exploration (Popper, 1992[1974], p. 52). Exploratory activity may be of a practical nature, take the form of a thought experiment, or both.

One of the most radical ideas from evolutionary epistemology is the notion that expectations are not created out of sense data or other basic informational elements received from the physical and social environment (Swann, 2007b, 2007c). Rather

[4] Though, of course, any complex society will have a variety of roles to which its members will, by one means or other, be assigned.

they develop, invariably and entirely, through a process (often implicit) of trial and error-elimination, that is, problem-solving (Popper, 1979[1972]; 1994, chapter 1). The effect of the social and physical environment is purely one of *selection*, the environment serving merely to challenge the learner's expectations (implicit and explicit) and potentially eliminate them (Popper, 1979[1972]; 1994, chapter 1). Accordingly, learning never takes place *by* instruction from without, although it may of course take place *in response to* instruction (Swann and Burgess, 2005). The only true instruction is from within the learner – the learner is the source of her or his expectations. Individuals learn insofar as they accept, or even seek out, challenges from the environment and are able to respond to them creatively (though not necessarily successfully). The process by which learning takes place can best be described as one of imaginative criticism (Popper, 1979[1972], p. 148).

Imaginative criticism requires at least a minimal degree of dissatisfaction with some aspect of an existing state of affairs, and the inclination, confidence and ability to invent a means by which that state of affairs might be changed and, potentially, improved. I say 'potentially' because what develops in learning (new expectations) and as a consequence of learning (new expectations exploited in practice) is not necessarily good. Learning involves progression, that is, transition from one state of affairs to a *different* one; but progress, transition from one state of affairs to a *better* one, is not guaranteed[5].

5. **TEACHING**

This view of learning has implications for teaching and learning for democracy. If one rejects the notion that ideas about democracy can be transferred by instruction, then teaching for democracy is not a matter of presenting students with a predetermined and prescribed set of ideas and arguments for them to imbibe. Learning for democracy requires an opportunity to engage in imaginative criticism, to formulate practical and theoretical problems about social decision-making and the exercise of power, and to develop and test theoretical and practical solutions. Neither teaching nor learning for democracy should be construed merely as a matter of including lessons on citizenship within the school curriculum (although, depending on their nature, such lessons may be useful). I am not suggesting that students do not learn during lessons on citizenship or on any other matters that their teachers and those who influence them have decided are important. What I am proposing is that most of what is learned is not what the teachers have planned, and that students will potentially become better learners when a learner-centred approach to teaching is adopted.

One of the significant things that students learn in most schools is that they are not responsible for the content of their formal programmes of learning. Whatever the teacher says about human rights, freedom from tyranny, and so on,

[5] I am grateful to Peter Munz for the sharpness of this distinction.

what the students experience is a system in which they are offered limited choices and are hardly ever in a position to exercise preference. They may be offered a menu of options but if they would prefer to learn and develop in a different direction this will rarely be possible.

After a long period of not being able to exercise preference, one may lose touch with the kinds of things one would prefer to do, and, even if one does not lose touch, the opportunity to develop one's preferences will be impeded by the need to spend time on one or more of the options that have been determined by others. What one learns is to subordinate self to others, not in the spirit of collaboration, but in order to fit the education system. There are penalties for those who fail to conform or meet expected predefined standards. This is, quite simply, tyranny. And it is put into effect, not by violence (at least not in systems where corporal punishment has been made illegal) but by coercion, manipulation and bullying.

I do not wish to disparage the benign intentions and best pedagogical endeavours of teachers working within a conventional system of formal education. I also acknowledge that some schools, including those for the youngest children, have councils in which students are genuinely empowered to make and share in decisions affecting the life of the school. But personal qualities, pedagogical skills and school councils cannot by themselves eliminate the oppressive effect of a prescribed curriculum (and its associated assessment regime).

6. **RETHINKING TEACHING**

Teaching, as I construe it, is any activity undertaken on the part of one individual with the aspiration of helping another individual, or many individuals, to learn. One does not have to set out to teach anything in particular, and although intentionality is required I do not subscribe to the view that awareness of the intention to promote learning is intrinsic to the act of teaching.

I realise, however, that some people define teaching and education as the business of initiating students into specific ways of thinking and other activities that the students' 'superiors' have deemed to be worthwhile and important. According to this view, insofar as conventional education fails to prepare people to become members of a democratic society, it is because the prescribed curriculum requires further development or because teachers need to be better trained to 'deliver' it. It is, however, only possible to hold such a view if one believes that learning can take place by instruction from without, and if one believes that, under the right conditions, what is learned is what is taught.

The idea that learning does not take place by instruction from without is novel within the field of education and I do not wish to rest my argument exclusively on it. One does not have to accept an evolutionary theory of learning in order to recognise the tension inherent in teaching about democracy while practicing a form of tyranny, albeit with benign intent. But I do wish to emphasise

that, outside the field of education, theories have been developed about what happens when learning takes place, and about consciousness, that are an anathema to many educationists.

Resistance to the notion that learning never takes place by means of the direct transfer of sense data or other basic informational elements from the environment appears to be linked to a belief that learning is invariably a conscious process. If one believes that one is conscious of one's learning, then the idea that all learning involves trial and error-elimination appears to be a nonsense.

There is, however, extensive evidence from the field of consciousness studies to suggest that most of what we do is done unconsciously, and that when we decide to act we become aware of the decision only after it has been formed (Nørretranders, 1998[1991]; Gray, 2004). Put simply, mostly we do not know what we are doing, and when we do know we know only a fraction of a second after the event. The full implications of this for pedagogy and curriculum are yet to be explored (Wiliam, 2006), but given that present practice has mostly been built on a foundation of quite contrary thinking, we should surely reconsider much of what is taken for granted about learning and teaching.

7. AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL OF TEACHING

Whether a particular approach to teaching is effective is an empirical matter – the proof of the pudding is in the eating. But how we construe effective teaching involves value judgements. In this paper I have assumed that democracy is a good thing, that it is a means of reducing tyranny, and that learning for democracy and teaching for democracy are meaningful and valuable ideas.

Learning for democracy requires individuals to develop as autonomous learners. Although learning for democracy is not synonymous with learning for autonomy (Meighan and Siraj-Blatchford, 1997), the latter is integral to the former. Fully autonomous individuals are, among other things, confident and skilled in taking the initiative for the content of their learning; they are not merely adept in responding to the initiatives of others. Learning for autonomy and learning for democracy both require that the individual has the will, confidence and skills to participate constructively in social decision-making and decision-taking. Individuals can do this only if they have the power to make decisions, act on them and take responsibility for the outcomes. This power must be a reality in order for the learning to take place, not something bestowed if and when the individual has learnt a series of other ideas and skills. If we are to learn how to do something, we have to engage in a process of try-it-and-see.

How then can teaching, particularly within formal education, be made more conducive both to the development of learner autonomy and to the encouragement of democracy? This is a problem that those with a commitment to democracy need to address. I would argue that any effective solution must involve finding ways to

encourage and support students to take responsibility for the content of their formal programmes of learning. Taking responsibility means being party to the process by which curriculum content is decided. Full participation involves having the opportunity and ability to take the initiative in formulating ideas – in the expectation that they can be acted upon.

There have been many practical, usually small-scale and localised, teaching initiatives in which individual autonomy is better respected and democratic values better expressed than in conventional mainstream education. Between 1981 and 1987, as a teacher in an inner London primary school, I developed with classes of children aged 7 to 11 years an approach to student-initiated curricula (Swann, 1988) that drew on my knowledge of the design and function of the School for Independent Study at what was then North East London Polytechnic (Burgess, 1977; Stephenson, 1980, 1981)[6]. In the next section of this paper I set out a seven-stage procedure that outlines key features of this independent-study approach.

8. A SEVEN-STAGE PROCEDURE FOR DEVELOPING STUDENT-INITIATED CURRICULA

The following procedure has been adapted and edited from Swann (2006), which was modified from Swann (1983, 1999). The procedure is designed for teachers working with a group or class, but it can be used in any teacher-student relationship. It could be adopted when planning an entire formal curriculum (as was the case in the School for Independent Study), or substantial parts thereof (as it was in my primary classroom). Even in England, despite the demands of the national curriculum, the procedure could be adopted in almost any school, at least on a limited basis – one day a week, every afternoon, or two weeks a term. Assuming that the national curriculum could be suspended, I have elsewhere outlined a proposal for research by means of which one of the principal theories embodied in this approach to teaching could be tested (Swann, 2003a).

Stage 1: The teacher sets out to help students formulate their learning problems.

In practice, the most effective procedure may be for the teacher to ask the students to think about 'what they are good at, what they can do' – to encourage a sense of achievement – and after this to consider 'what they would like to become better at, what they would like to know more about'. Only after working with the problem-based approach for a period of time may a student decide, for example, that her principal learning problem is one of 'how to become a reader'. Note that students may focus on problems that we, as teachers, consider to be peripheral, but which nonetheless will lead to more profound learning. For example, a child may

[6] The School for Independent Study was in operation from 1974–1991.

spend several weeks studying dinosaurs, and in the process greatly improve her ability to read and write[7].

Teachers must recognise that they cannot control what the students' learning problems will be. The teacher's problem and the student's problem are always different, though they may share an understanding of a problem situation. The adoption of student-initiated curricula does not rule out a two-way exchange between teacher and student; it is not inconsistent with a sharing of interests and problem contexts.

Helping students to formulate learning problems is rarely unproblematic. Mostly, students do not formulate learning problems because (a) they are not given the opportunity, (b) when they are asked a question about what they wish to learn they interpret this as a 'test', whereby they have to work out what the teacher wants them to say or do, and (c) the formulation of the most significant learning problems is often accompanied by feelings of discomfort.

Stage 1 usually requires the teacher to find ways of removing factors which impede students from formulating their learning problems. This involves skill as well as understanding.

Stage 2: At the second stage, the teacher identifies which of the students' learning problems can be addressed within the specific learning environment with the help of her- or himself, other teachers and students, and by using existing resources, or by involving individuals and agencies outwith the learning environment. Students may formulate learning problems for which the teacher/school can be of little or no help; but some ideas which at first seem impractical or even impossible may be addressed in a modified form.

Stage 3: Some of the students' learning aspirations may be inappropriate or incapable of being addressed by the teacher(s) and the institution. A student may wish to pursue learning that is morally unacceptable, or not feasible in terms of resources. When a student's learning proposal is rejected, the arguments underlying this decision should be made clear.

Many judgements with regard to the curriculum involve values extrinsic to the general question of what promotes and what inhibits learning. What counts as morally unacceptable, for example, involves judgements of this kind. But, as a general principle, the problems that are the focus of the curriculum should be negotiated between the teacher and students, and as far as possible the curriculum should be based on student preference. This does not prevent the teacher from making suggestions, or prevent her or him from asserting the importance of some things rather than others, or stop her from vetoing the students' proposals (though one would expect there to be good reason for her doing so).

[7] These and other aspects of the procedure are elaborated on in Swann (2007a).

Stage 4: The teacher's task is to help students plan their learning, paying attention to: their skills, talents and achievements; available resources and expertise; their learning problems; time available; critical evaluation (by helping students to state what would count as a failure of their educational plans). Explicit attention to what happens when learning takes place may form part of the discussion. (At the School for Independent Study, the learning plans of undergraduate students were subject to formal validation.)

Stage 5: The teacher supports students in the fulfilment of their plans, offering, where appropriate, encouragement, additional resources (when available) and critical discussion.

Stage 6: The teacher critically discusses with students the scope of their learning problems and proposed solutions after they have been worked on, considering to what extent the formulated problems were well-conceived, whether better problems could have been formulated, and what factors (if any) can be identified to improve future problem formulation. In my experience, this is the most difficult step to apply satisfactorily. It might best be left until after the following stage, to allow time for reflection.

Stage 7: The teacher helps students to compile a record of their learning. The record will include a statement of the initial learning problems; it will show where trial solutions were found to be successful, where they failed and what was learnt from the experience. It will also include an outline of learning problems that have developed from the work undertaken. (At the School for Independent Study, student attainment was formally examined and accredited at this stage.)

9. **A CHALLENGE**

To conclude this paper, I challenge those who are sceptical about the value of student-initiated curricula either to describe a better means by which learner autonomy can be promoted or to explain how democracy can be encouraged without the development of learner autonomy within formal education.

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