TOWARD A PRAGMATIST-INSPIRED REDESIGN OF EDUCATION

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Introduction

Philosopher of education Gerald Gutek tells us that what is meant by education includes the "process of providing a person with the knowledge, skills, competence or usually desirable qualities of behaviour or character by a formal course of study, instruction, or training."[1] An interesting aspect of this definition is what kinds of knowledge and behaviour are to be considered. This paper asks how education can produce decision makers and responsible citizens for a democratic and sustainable society. It posits that the kinds of knowledge and behaviour sought can be informed by pragmatist theories of action and learning. What is significant about this theory for education is its learning in action, its preference for teaching democracy by joining a campaign.

Pragmatism, Education, Knowledge and Learning

Education has largely aimed at instilling students with knowledge. This objective is consistent with an image of the individual contemplating an array of previous facts, cases, intuitions, and relationships in taking their particular course of action. A singular focus on knowledge in education potentially contributes to an image of people as mere response-machines, responding without cares, motivations, reasons, or goals.

Pragmatism asserts that knowledge is an experimental outcome. Contemporary pragmatists, like Hans Joas emphasize the idea that human behaviour is characterized by an alternation between habitual and creative solutions to problematic situations.[2] Furthermore, Joas and other pragmatists posit a theory of human action that sees people considering a variety of habitual and creative responses at once, only rarely pursuing one to the detriment of all others; each situation tugs and pulls at people's experiences and ideas in different ways.

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[1] Gerald L. Gutek, Philosophical and ideological voices in education (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2004), 3.

[2] See for example, Hans Joas, Pragmatism and social theory (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

Furthermore, pragmatists insist that learning is centred in action, not in knowledge. In pragmatism, knowledge is a way of understanding the world: know-how, knowing-that, ways of wanting and feeling.[3]

In pragmatism, a vastly different understanding of education emerges than knowledge accumulation. Learning, according to pragmatists, is an action that involves the active interpretation of a context. This interpretation can invoke habits and creativity and it can result in the creation of new knowledge. The experience of a new context that necessitates problem solving is crucial to understanding education in the pragmatist model because, according to this theory, it is problems that generate new knowledge. To understand how different the pragmatist model is from other models let's imagine a reading of this paper by someone who is discovering pragmatism for the first time. As part of their learning, this reader monitors and reflects upon their habitual understanding of human decision-making as the byproduct of having knowledge. As a result of this reflection, they appreciate, perhaps for the first time, the prevalence of habits in their own lives. In addition, she or he might also understand that new knowledge won't automatically unseat any habits they have. They might also begin to question the very idea that more knowledge will alone solve a problem. Hopefully, this hypothetical reader ends their reflection by observing that we humans tend towards experimentation and creative solutions more so than knowledge. If all these points hit home, learning would be linked to creative problem solving that consumes past experiences and informs new experimentation. Looked at this way, learning can lead to action, while still leaving open the possibility that it will not. Learning, then, is a change in knowledge that creates the capacity for action.

A Pragmatist-Inspired Thought Experiment in Education

This paper posits pragmatism as a more accurate interpretation of human action, including education. The previous paragraphs focused on the individual and here we think about the same mechanisms but at the level of the institution. Pragmatism argues that problem solving and experimentation are the central human activities. This argument asserts that institutions can benefit from installing local experiments to test their ideas and assumptions. In doing so, the knowledge available expands the range of life experience available to an institution, exposes routines to problematic situations, and creates new possibilities for organizational learning and reform.

Recently a colleague and I developed a model for re-designing the social institution of education that also relates practice to research and integrates local experiments into the fabric of the school system. Successful ideas can be disseminated to new contexts, and other schools can avoid repeating previously unsuccessful experiments to the detriment of students. This model conveys a thought experiment that begins with a commitment to buttressing the existing institutional structure of education with a new administrative body, which we call the Epistemic Division. This

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[3]   Andreas Reckwitz, "Toward a Theory of Social Practices :A development in culturalist theorizing." *European journal of social theory*, *5*, no. 2 (2002), 243-263.

new structure is designed to generate and maintain a rigorous knowledge base for educational practice through educational research in classrooms across the school system, primary to postsecondary. The new structure will serve to supplement the existing institution of education, while leaving much of contemporary education intact. In addition to structural transformation, our proposal calls for new professional standards and daily routines in teaching and administration, such as collaborative research. If these proposals can plausibly be implemented in the real world, the cumulative changes will be substantial and encompassing.

One of the primary responsibilities of the Epistemic Division would be to design research projects, and collect and analyze ensuing data. These projects would be organized to consider earlier findings and develop cumulatively, according to prevailing understandings of education in the research community and inclusive of the various policies and contexts of the educational institution. Researchers in education will draw on local issues and consider these experiences as possible data to inform existing ideas, theories, and programs. Committees would be tasked with evaluating the state of knowledge on a given topic and scaling research projects appropriately over time. Classrooms and participants would be recruited and assigned according to the investments in the research and the risk involved in a project.

The data resulting from these projects would be collected like Google Scholar does, but it would also be analyzed in a central database, allowing experts to assess the state of knowledge and identify future directions for research. Researchers' confidence in relationships posited by previous research would be expressed as a probability; attempts to find these relationships in new studies would result in fresh and contextualized data that, in turn, helps to determine whether those confidence levels should increase or decrease. Over time, some findings about teaching and learning wouldreveal themselves to be limited by historical contingency, and the institution (and the social sciences more broadly) can adapt accordingly.

This database of cutting-edge knowledge would also provide teachers and administrators with empirical evidence to support educational improvement, both directly—through powerful data mining tools so that researchers can assess their immediate circumstances in light of accumulated knowledge—and indirectly, through regular publications about exciting developments, culminating in a standard best practices database, updated regularly. The availability of this information would make it possible to tailor educational practices to fit the needs of students, whether individually or in groups. With added customization, the overall quality of our schools would increase, as students are given not only personalized attention, but also empirically grounded learning experiences. In a broader social context, policymakers would also have access to this database and the wider research functions in education, allowing educational and social interventions around issues like obesity or multiculturalism to be grounded in empirical data.

Conclusion

Although the proposal above is a concrete one, the underlying principles are theoretical and conceptual, based on the work of pragmatists as exemplified by, but not limited to, the nineteenth century educator and thinker John Dewey.[4] Pragmatism argues that: all human activity is directed toward learning and is "experimental" in nature; and knowledge is based on individuals' responses to life experiences and the habits of behavior developed over time. When we argue that institutions can benefit from undertaking local experiments, such as the use of drama to teach math, we are proposing an expansion of the life experience available to an institution. This will create new possibilities for organizational learning and reform.

An educational institution that is flexible, evidence-based, and congruent with the massive resources and capacities at our disposal acknowledges the pragmatist reality of adjustment and change. By reimagining our educational systems to make gathering and applying research-based evidence a driving force, we can move closer to fostering responsible decision makers and citizens in a democracy.

Biography

Robert VanWynsberghe is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. His research is rooted in questions about human action and social change in relation to sustainability and education.

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4   See for example John Dewey, *The middle works of John Dewey, Vol. 14: Human nature, and conduct* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008 [1922]).