

Horizons of Modality

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INTRODUCTION

From the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, the entry for Philosophy of Education states:

"There is a large—and ever expanding—number of works designed to give guidance to the novice setting out to explore the domain of philosophy of education. The overall picture that emerges from even a sampling of this collective is not pretty; the field lacks intellectual cohesion, and... there is a widespread problem concerning the rigor of the work and the depth of scholarship..." (Phillips and Siegel, 2018)

Strong words. The authors discuss several other significant worries about the study of philosophy of education as well. The literature contains polemics by self-described 'philosophers' with an axe to grind. It also includes writings what more accurately would be termed "educational thought" written by people who have some degree of familiarity with the educational process. These do touch on philosophical issues but lack depth. A third group includes the likes of B.F. Skinner and Jean Piaget who often commented on philosophical issues but remain famous for their learning theory not for their substantial philosophical commentary.

I think you get the picture. It is not the case that the scholarship is shoddy from an education perspective. It is, however, the case that what is often termed to be philosophy of education is at best a mixture of psychology, sociology, and pedagogy. What passes for philosophical analysis is often strategic decision-making aimed at curriculum goals. This, unfortunately, produces a variety of competing 'philosophies' within the education world and draws patronizing sneers from professional philosophers.

A second point is the difficulty in defining the boundaries of any subset within the field of education. In our case, the idea of the philosophy of adult education simply compounds the philosophical challenge by adding, to philosophy of education, a conceptual construct that doubles the definitional difficulty. Lawson (1985) contends "that there is unavoidable ambiguity

in such concepts, that they cannot be objectively identified and that the definition of an area of research entails a number of value judgements." (p. 39) In other words, we are adding an ambiguous term to an already ill-define substrate. Adult education "is in fact highly prescriptive and enshrine[s] values which are specific to Western cultures. We are not dealing with an objective self-evident unitary reality." (p. 42) Without a doubt, there are definitional problems here. And sorting them out would produce a series of alternative attitudinal positions (philosophies) but the alternative descriptive monikers for those positions seem all too pre-packaged to really qualify one to have done any actual philosophical analysis. Later in this paper, for example, I claim to be from the humanist camp. Later still, I exhibit radical/critical tendencies. The point here is that I am a member of these camps because I match the definitions of them, not on account of the philosophy I have done.

Therefore, I want to steer clear of this kind of little-p 'philosophizing' except as a method to anchor my thoughts to more common parlance. I hope to construct something novel. I hope to accomplish one task in this short paper - to outline a conception of education that is cross-borderish, if you will, partly grounded in Continental thinking and partly in the Anglo-American philosophical tradition. I wish to express what I mean by adult education and learning in terms of the modality described in the study of modal logic.

There are a couple of reasons for this. The first reason is suggested by the way we speak. For those of us who speak English and have learned a foreign language, a major stumbling point is understanding the subjunctive mood, the expression of possibility and the hypothetical. In English we express these ideas without special words. Therefore, we pay no special attention to

the difference between what is and what might be except in the moment of expression. But in most other languages subjunctivity is expressed with a completely separate category of verbal conjugation. The point is that our language expresses not only what is (the indicative mood) but also what is possibly so (the subjunctive mood). Our language expresses different ways of thinking about the world. The meaning of our observations of the world (our knowledge) is predicated on the mood (or mode) we approach it with. Therefore, it is imperative that we are taught how to think in each of the modes.

The second reason for thinking long about the idea of possibility is the claim in the work world that what is needed is people with creative thinking skills. But far too much of children's education is devoted to *constraining* 'dreamers'. It is devoted largely to one mode of thinking - to what is. I think that creativity and possibility thinking must be rekindled in those washed clean of it. The way we speak of our world as reflected in our language and what is said to be a desirable outcome is not reflected in the manner of our education. So either we change the way we do education (not likely) or the educational deficiency must be overcome as adults.

THE HORIZON

My philosophical orientation regarding education originates from the Gadamerian concept of horizon. And, given that I believe that it is the duty of educators to broaden that horizon in students, one might characterize my orientation as humanist. This is not surprising considering that I have spent a good part of my life in the company of somewhat left leaning people and that I have long joked that we teachers are really just secular humanist priests. While I do take this horizon broadening task seriously, I do not do so in the usual manner. I do not

simply try to expose students to a wide variety of subjects. This is only scratching the surface. I believe that it is more important to have students also understand that they, themselves, are at the centre of their own horizons and that they have a responsibility to it. Just as importantly (maybe more), is the understanding that these horizons also intersect with other peoples' horizons. I want my students to understand that by continuing to learn they increase their power, their potential, and their possibility. In other words, each of our horizons (our interests, skills, knowledge, and propensities, etc.) is not only a reflection of ourselves but also the manner in which we fit socially. So, when a person wants to learn something, they are not only acquiring a skill. By learning, my students are changing their social position. This is why I think that education is considered dangerous in some societies. Because we teachers are the guides that help students to navigate their horizons and show those students how their horizons are built, we wield the power that controls the dynamism of our culture.

To some, however, my advocating for a turn toward logic in education may seem incongruous within a context of horizon thinking. To those same people, such a turn may be just the resurrecting of a rationalism that had already withered by last century's midterm. But logical positivism met its demise mostly because it did not take *enough* of reality into account.¹ Although logic was at the centre of that movement, its penchant for assuming a one-dimensional structure of meaning solely as the correspondence of truth statements with the facts of reality doomed it. It failed to account for the possible and contingent. It failed to account for the

¹ "Logical positivism was an influential philosophical movement which wanted to deal only with what is empirically given and to do it only through an extensional logic. As such it was a kind of test case of making philosophy without modalities." (Knuuttila, 1988, p.xiv)

concentric peripheries of our epistemic horizons. The simple propositional logic that logical positivism relied on was inadequate to the task and was supplanted by systems of modal logic that better reflect the connotative nature of meaning rather than the merely denotative nature of fact. These systems of modal logic suggest to me that a theory of education and learning should be developed to keep pace with this new way of thinking. This is what I am trying to do. I am trying to formulate a way of learning that approximates a human maturity, one that takes into account the potential attitudinal perspectives of fully developed people.

OF MODALITY

I think that learning is about differentiation not acquisition. It is about distinguishing, first of all, between what is and what is not. It goes without saying, then, that learning and education is not primarily about memorizing facts or picking up skills. It is not about learning how to think either. It's about what things are and what things are not. Right from the get go, from out of William James' "blooming buzzing confusion", comes the distinction between what is and what is not. In our moments of peace and tranquility we come to understand that the confusion of the world is not a permanently overwhelming spectre. This is the fundamental concept of learning. It is differentiation, not fact gathering.

My challenge, of course, is to generalize on this characterization of learning. One way is to take the naive view of horizon-broadening and simply expose students to different sensory stimulations but this approach has serious limitations in meaning. What quickly becomes evident is that distinguishing between what is and what is not requires further distinction, ie. what is sometimes (what is possible, what is contingent, what might be). Not only do we learn to tell

what is an apple, for example, from what is not an apple, we learn to distinguish between what is necessary for something to be an apple and what is not necessary for it to be so. From there we learn what is possible and what is impossible for something to be an apple. We learn ideas of conditionality. This is modal thinking.

Modal thinking goes deeper still. The modality of the possible further implies a temporal impermanence. It implies the characteristics of the possible in terms of what was, what is, and what is to come. Moreover, when we learn to expect what is to come, we learn what ought to be and what is desirable: whether it is obligatory, permissible, or forbidden. So, the idea of modal possibility implies a temporal mode and a deontic mode. From this foundation the epistemic and doxastic modes (of knowledge and belief) can also be understood. The meaning of our world becomes increasingly nuanced by our own modal attitudes to it. Strange, indeed, if viewed only from standard Cartesianism.

Let me be clear, though. When I talk about learning in terms of modality I do not mean one of the several theories of modes or styles of learning. Specifically, I do not mean the term 'mode' to mean a preference for learning style or preferred sensory input related to the idea of multiple intelligences. Nor do I intend the term to mean something like the multimodality of media and communication theory. Both of these refer to modes of sensory input. What I am trying to describe, instead, are the various modal filters through which we process that sensory input.

Learning modally reflects a rejection of the 'filling the bucket' mentality of education. While it is still important to retain the indicative mood (modally speaking, the alethic mode)

more weight needs to be placed upon thinking in the various forms of possibility and plausibility as well as in the various forms of value based modes.

ADULT EDUCATION

As mentioned in the opening paragraphs there are issues around defining what an adult is. These definitional issues are compounded by attempting to define adult education simply that education which adults engage in. This all seems to boil down to the kinds of beliefs about the roles of the educational participants. What is the role of the adult student as opposed to the child student? What is the role of the instructor to an adult? Are the expected outcomes different? How are they different? etc., etc., etc.

I would like to avoid the issue of adulthood altogether for one reason in particular - that as I have become older my definition of maturity changes. The older I get, the more clearly I see peoples' development continue well past the time when they stop growing physically. I see people well into their thirties as still young people. I am becoming convinced that we never reach a point of mature adulthood, a point where we can say we are ripe and complete. So, apart from the somewhat arbitrary physical definition, in my view, there is no such thing as an adult. There is only a propensity or potential to think in increasingly sophisticated modal ways.

The only thing that I can see that might define an adult learner is the decisiveness that accompanies the desire to change. It is even difficult to conceive of learning without some such concept of motivation. But this question is a meta-question. Is motivation, itself, a learned category? If it is, then there is an infinite regress. (How does one become motivated to become motivated and so on?) If it is not learned what triggers motivation in some but not in others?

What causes one to expand one's horizon? Anger? Arrogance? Insecurity? Is there a relationship between emotions and logical modality? What animates the soul?

Perhaps what we can call adult learning is when a person seeks out new potential, new possibility, new ways of being, and new modality. Whether the person wants to brush up on bicycle repair techniques or take in a course on the philosophy of adult education, that person is seeking to build themselves into a newer model with a wider horizon.

CONCLUSION

What is clear to me is that most adults are mired in basic modal thinking. They think in the simple terms of what is and what is not. What is striking about adults who become students again is that, by the act of deciding to learn again, they have already begun the transition, not just to a new skill or a new career, but toward a new self, a new potential. They will forever be bigger.

I freely admit to going out on a limb in this paper but it would seem that real philosophy cannot be done without such attendant risk. Horizons are not stretched without risk. Growth is not without potential pushback. Indeed, the broaching of an educational framework that *adds* complexity rather than idolized simplicity, would invite invectives from the victims of such a change. At the same time, though, I recognize that the vulnerability that comes with such broaching is exactly what is required of those who raise new ideas and is precisely the horizon's horns one must hold.

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