Democracy & Education

Being Critical About Being Critical

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Abstract

This response to "Toward a Transformative Criticality for Democratic Citizenship Education" takes a positive and supportive stance toward pressing the arguments forward. By focusing on the communicative components of democratic citizenship education and activist pedagogy, it highlights some of the tensions and difficulties of actually doing this work.

This article is in response to

Y OU DO NOT often find your work getting such generous and thoughtful treatment as mine receives in this essay, and I am grateful to Sibbett (2016) for engaging these issues and pressing the conversation further in some very fruitful and insightful directions. In that spirit, I want to build further upon this conversation, and revisit along the way some of my earlier work on criticality.

There were three main themes in that essay with Rupert Berk (Burbules & Berk, 1999). One was that the critical thinking and the critical pedagogy traditions each offer a valuable critical perspective on the other; while there are some areas of overlap, their real benefit is dialectical: The critical pedagogy tradition highlights how critical thinking analyses neglect issues of power; the critical thinking tradition highlights how critical pedagogy assumes certain political stances that, because they are unquestioned, can lead to a kind of indoctrination. The second concern was that each of these traditions is insufficiently *self*-critical—that a thoroughgoing criticality is willing to pull up its own roots and to question its own elisions (as any theory or world view has). This produces a critical stance that is more provisional and less authoritative, grounded in an attitude of questioning and doubt rather than an assertion of a superior epistemic (or political) standpoint (Burbules, 1995). The third is that our notion of criticality includes the capacity for thinking differently, putting one's self outside of any potential hegemony (of the right or of the left).

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In this essay, Sibbett (2016) took up some of the themes of that essay and developed her own conception of criticality, which she called "transformative criticality." Part of the question here is how the educational value of promoting a critical orientation is tied to certain notions of citizenship and discourse in public life. Sibbett questioned an approach toward "democratic citizenship" grounded in ideas of pluralism, tolerance, and reasonable deliberation. That account, grounded in the liberal tradition, sees criticality as a means for contrasting points of view to engage one another, openly, with tolerance and respect, questioning one another and seeking understanding and consensus within a discursive style that is critical but reasonable. That process of engagement may entail conflict, difference, and rigorous disagreement, but within a framework of shared values and purposes: the pursuit of truth, the achievement of compromise, and the empathetic appreciation of cultural differences (Burbules & Rice, 1991). This approach exemplifies the virtues of a liberal democracy, Sibbett pointed out, and for that reason is more easily accommodated in traditional educational contexts.

The problem with this approach is not that it is impossible or wrong in its objectives. It is difficult to imagine an educational context that we would call *educational* that does not embrace aims like the pursuit of truth, the achievement of compromise, or the empathetic appreciation of cultural differences. The problem is that in conditions of unequal power or cultural dominance, the reasonable rules of the game for the pursuit of these aims are felt and experienced differently by some participants; what might look like an uncoerced consensus or agreement might in fact be built upon exclusions that do not accommodate certain voices and points of view because they cannot be expressed within the rules of that game. Everyone who speaks and participates may be satisfied, but the problem is for those who do not. So, we need a critical orientation that can recognize, question, and give voice to those exclusions.

Sibbett's (2016) alternative is based upon three key ideas. One, adapted from Apple, is a "decentered unity," a coalescence around an idea of common good that balances the values of respecting difference and of solidarity. It is "decentered" because it is not built around a priori principles and "not reducible to one understanding." The second, drawing from Westheimer and Kahne, is the idea of "participatory and justice-oriented citizenship," participatory because it involves actual engagement with government and community organizations directed toward "accomplishing collective tasks," and justice-oriented because it grows out of a recognition and critique of "systems and structures that reproduce patterns of injustice." The third grows out of Sibbett's own conception of wholeheartedness, an effort to reconcile the apparent duality of reasonableness and fervent critique within a more wholistic, passionate caring that encompasses grief, outrage, *and* "listening generously," the sentiments of despair *and* hope, the impulses toward activism *and* deliberation. Sibbett's conception of transformative criticality seeks to ground the idea of critique in the conditions that actually make transformative praxis possible; it strives to achieve a synthesis of ideas that do not always cohabit easily, embracing tensions rather than trying to easily resolve them, and

keeping constantly in mind the conditions that actually enable and empower people toward committed action.

Does this synthesis succeed? Sibbett (2016) cited the work of Stitzlein (2012) in her book *Teaching for Dissent* as a model of the synthesis of critical thinking and critical pedagogy underlying the idea of "transformative criticality." This line of influence is not entirely surprising, since Stitzlein is a former student of mine—though I do not mean by this to take any credit for her work and ideas. Sibbett identified in Stitzlein's book parallels with the three key ideas of decentered unities, participatory and justice-oriented citizenship, and wholeheartedness that she is advocating, even when Stitzlein's terminology might differ. Clearly we are talking about a scholarly research program here with diverse lines of influence and convergence.

In supporting and building on Sibbett's argument, I want to emphasize the central role of communication in each of the three key ideas that she draws together. For me, actual processes of communication are the place where second-order principles of social and political commitment get worked out in practice, and our abilities to make these processes of communication work are essential to the success of coordinated action and understanding directed toward progressive change.

Habermas's distinction of strategic communication and communication directed toward understanding provides a useful starting point (1984). Activist pedagogy, and the specific activities that constitute it, continually raise the question of whether the goal is to bring about a specific state of affairs that the pedagogue has in mind, and which the students are intended to believe in and work toward, or whether it is to enable and empower students to make choices, set goals, and pursue actions that may yield a range of possible outcomes—some of which might be quite different from what the pedagogue has in mind. In the first instance, "social justice" is a shorthand for a set of specific beliefs about how society ought to be organized, and the only question is how to accomplish it; in the second instance, the pedagogue has to be prepared for student choices that (may) surprise and disappoint them. Sibbett (2016) characterized this dilemma as the problem of avoiding "indoctrination," and pedagogically that is a crucial issue. But it is also a question of whether the pedagogue presumes to know the choices others ought to make and how society should be organized. In one sense, this more teleological view of activism is a legacy of the Marxist roots of critical pedagogy, even now as it has been vastly complicated by considerations of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Marx believed there was an achievable state of communism, equality, and freedom, in which conflict would come to an end. On this view, transformation is the transformation from A to B, where B is a given endpoint. Sibbett, I believe, was trying to avoid that association. Habermas's distinction, then, forces us to ask whether pedagogical communication, in the classroom and other venues, is strategic—designed to produce a particular outcome—or more open-ended, a process aimed toward understanding and choice that may yield a set of conclusions that cannot be predicted or determined in advance.

First, a "decentered unity," as Sibbett (2016) described it, is a prime example of an outcome that cannot be determined in

advance. It is closely akin to the idea of a "third space," an idea I explored at some length in a previous essay:

> A third space . . . is not a "middle ground" or "merging" or "compromise" between the original views, but a reframing of the topic—one that may indeed implicitly challenge the way in which the topic is originally being framed. Furthermore, a third space is not necessarily a "solution" to the problem of disagreement or misunderstanding. Some appropriations of the term want to domesticate the notion, turn it into another way in which "bad" conflicts can be made to go away, or work out nicely. But I would insist that third spaces are problematic and problematizing moments, risky and as prone to chaos, or even heightened conflict, as to producing new understandings. Viewing third space as a mutually established, shared discursive zone also reveals its provisional character, bounded in circumstance, space, and time. Sometimes discursive third spaces are linked to actual border zones—a room, a street, a table, an open plain, where contending parties meet—and sometimes also are linked to specific practices, even rituals, that establish an un-usual place and time . . . Most important, third spaces, while requiring the participation of multiple actors from different discursive frames (and in this sense having a consensual character) do not necessarily yield anything that can be called in a simple way consent, agreement, or understanding. Conflicts which preceded the encounter may still exist, perhaps even with a heightened and more vivid impact. Third spaces do not necessarily make conflicts go away—that is not their primary purpose and value. They become a potential framework in which to recognize and discuss those conflicts with fresh terms and perspectives, and in that possibly to understand them better . . . It requires a tolerance for a certain kind of friction, risk, and uncertainty. It requires a judgment about who is worth pursuing such understandings with, and who is not. (Burbules, 2006, 114-115)

A third space is a communicative achievement: situated and contingent, accomplished by actual people in actual circumstances. It is not generalizable to other people or other circumstances. Like other aspects of Sibbett's arguments, it tries to get past dualities of optimism and pessimism, to pragmatic possibilities and hope (this is another point of contact with Stitzlein's work). It presses past Habermas's idea of communication aimed toward agreement or understanding to recognize that the outcomes of communication can have a variety of forms, some of them difficult and unstable, that are not necessarily convergent.

Second, the idea of "participatory and justice-oriented citizenship" also has a communicative core. Sibbett (2016) cited the work of Sanders (1997), "Against Deliberation," which argued that in conditions of unequal power, debate cannot always be reasonable. In Sanders' view, critique may sometimes become intemperate (p. 6). My avenue into this same idea comes from Young, who distinguishes deliberative and activist speech Young, I. M. (2001). Both are valuable in a democracy, but the rules of each are fundamentally different. Deliberation is a communicative stance geared toward speaking, listening, and working through a problem. Activist speech foregrounds conflict; it is oppositional and does not need (or want) a response. One might say that deliberation is speaking *with*; activist speech is speaking *to,* perhaps *at*, or even

against. In these twin notions, we see contrasting ideas of participatory citizenship, each perhaps suited to a particular set of circumstances, but not consistent with each other. To oversimplify: The deliberative approach prevails when you have a seat at the table; the activist approach when you are excluded from the table and want to challenge who is there, and why you are not. Sibbett sought to cultivate "both engagement and dissent," which seems right to me, but this perhaps underestimates the very different communicative rules, roles, and capabilities that support each of those valued goals. The kinds of people who are communicatively good at one, or more motivated to pursue one, may not be very good at the other.

The question of "justice-oriented" citizenship raises again the contrast between teleological and process-oriented conceptions of justice: whether one thinks one knows what an ideal society should look like, or whether one is committed to paths of engagement, exploration, and experimentation that may result in a range of possible (and unpredictable) futures. The characterization of justice-oriented citizenship provided by Sibbett (2016) is mainly negative: she cites Westheimer and Kahne's appeal to teach young people to "question, debate, and change established systems and structures that reproduce patterns of injustice over time" (p. 8). That helps us in understanding the critical dimension of challenging those systems and structures but not in identifying where they should be changed, overthrown, or replaced with something better. What constitutes "better"? And who decides? Another legacy of the Marxist tradition is a dichotomous view of conflict: Group A is always right, and group B is always to blame; all conflict is the result of X, and if you can just transform or overthrow X, everything will be better. Many left critical positions still derive from this mode of thinking, and their conception of transformation is accordingly thin. The sources of human conflict and injustice are in fact multiple and cannot be traced to just one source. When one looks at things this way, there cannot be simple dualities of oppressor and oppressed, and one's theory of social change or transformation cannot be reduced to simply taking sides in advancing one group's interests over another's or overthrowing one particular system and replacing it with something else. What we need, I would suggest broadly, is an ongoing, iterative process of critique, reform, and self-questioning. There is no utopian end state.

Dissent and activist speech are essential dimensions of protest and agitating for change, and they often depend on implicit assumptions about directions for that change; but insofar as they arise from visceral reactions of anger or outrage at an existing injustice, they can be unreliable guides for positive action. In my experience, they often yield the political response of demands and assertion of principles as absolutes, which may have an invigorating political force but are not very compatible with the deliberative approach that is necessary to actually analyze problems, propose policies, and work toward acceptable compromises in the face of inevitable differences of opinion. Here again, focusing on the communicative dimension of these speech acts helps clarify the deep tensions between these political stances.

Third, I greatly appreciate Sibbett's (2016) discussion of wholeheartedness, because it helps to draw our attention to the

inescapable emotional dimension of political communication and political action. One of the shortcomings of Habermas's theory is that he conceives communication in almost purely cognitive terms. But language is not just for the expression of belief or the assertion of normative claims. Language, especially political language, is spoken by people with feelings, hopes, and fears. When political communication takes the form of "impassioned outcry" or expresses "grief, outrage, and despair" (Sibbett, 2016, p. 8) its moral force derives not only from its overt content but from the emotional impulses that give rise to it. Before there is critique, often, there is that raw prereflective sense of wrong: Sometimes even the simple, loud utterance of "No!" It is crucial to recognize, as Sibbett's account does, that this level of emotion and feeling is often inseparable from the "unwavering commitment" (p. 8) that supports sustained effort to pursue change beyond the articulation of critique.

I admire all of this. But I want to, again, suggest a deeper tension and difficulty. As I mentioned, visceral outrage does not help us see, and may in fact interfere with, the formulation of a positive alternative and a way of realistically achieving it. Part of nonindoctrinatory citizenship education of the sort Sibbett (2016) envisioned is to highlight for students the history of idealism gone awry, of good intentions that end up yielding their opposite, of absolutisms that end up creating their own oppressions, or of Berlinian conflicts between values that force hard choices and situated, workable compromises (Berlin, 2013). Deliberation, in other words, is not the opposite of activist speech: It is the objective toward which activist speech or dissent *must* be directed. You can demand a seat at the table, but once you are at the table, the language of demands does not work anymore. Within the deliberative frame you can challenge the terms of discussion, the positions of unequal power, or the privileging of certain ways of communicating. But you cannot always and only be doing that, or else participation is pointless. Levinson (2002) wrote:

> *Like the deliberative democrat, the activist is looking for a way to shift the focus from the interests of the powerful to the interests of the broader polity. Unlike the deliberative democrat, however, the activist does not think that the interests of the politically impoverished are likely to make their way into deliberative fora unless the disempowered use activist strategies to disrupt the way particular debates are framed. In short, the work of activists lays the groundwork for genuinely democratic deliberation. Far from derailing deliberative democracy, activism keeps it in on track. (p. 59)*

Reasonableness is not the foil against which to contrast some other mode of communicative engagement, nor is it the a priori privilege of certain people or groups: It is the difficult, contingent social practice of pursuing the solutions to certain problems in a way that respects differences and critically acknowledges the forces of context and history, without giving in to them. Reasonableness is what we work toward—what we must work toward—in any context that can legitimately be called educational.

That final point, I hope, provides the coda for this discussion, because Sibbett's (2016) work, and Stitzlein's (2012), and my own,

all operate within a space of not only analyzing the features of critical politics and citizenship writ large but of specifically caring about what these mean in the context of an education that prepares people for those activities. An activist pedagogy that is not clear about its educational goals may become indoctrinatory. An activist pedagogy that focuses only on the capacity for critique and not on the capacities and dispositions for positive, transformative action may leave students angry but futile. An activist pedagogy that neglects the institutional and other arenas in which citizenship actually happens will not provide students with the skills and understandings to be effective agents of change. And, as I have argued here, an activist pedagogy that overemphasizes specific teleologies threatens to produce just a different kind of absolutism and intolerance.[1]

If this is right, then we can open up a new set of questions—some of them empirical questions—about what sorts of educational experiences will provide students with these capacities and dispositions. Age and developmental readiness will be factors, as will the background and characteristics of different kinds of students from different backgrounds. An approach, for example, may be indoctrinatory when pursued with very young students but not so with more mature learners. Here and in many other contexts I have challenged the tendency of educators to seek the one approach, the new alternative or innovation, that will transform the classroom and energize the learning experience for all students. Unfortunately, progressive educators have often been just as susceptible to this illusory pursuit of "one best system" as the technocrats or normalizers they decry. If there is anything we should have learned it is that no one approach works for all students, for all needs and interests, for all learning styles, for all ages, for all contexts. There is no approach certain to succeed, and there is no approach that will not have some detrimental effects, for some students, at the same time that it is benefitting others (Burbules, 1990). Our choices, then, must also be about balancing, managing tensions, and working over time to revise and improve our efforts as we learn from our mistakes and failures.

And these, for me, are not only good principles for educators – they are good principles for thinking about politics as well.

Notes

1. I explore some of these questions further in my introduction to Boler's important book, *Dialogue in Education: Troubling Speech, Disturbing Silence.*

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