Stories vs. Practices: Education for Political Action

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Hannah Arendt often complained about historians who seek to trace the causes of the events they study, erasing in this way, the unpredictable agency of individuals. The danger she feared is that we will cease to believe that we can engage effectively to alter the course of history. Natasha Levinson's essay, as I understand it, struggles against such attitudes. How, she asks, can teachers and students learn to see themselves as potentially effective actors who are responsible for the common world? Levinson's discussion of Arendt's efforts to respond to this challenge is extremely thoughtful and nuanced, and her insights are important for the larger field.

Levinson frames her discussion partly as a response to an essay of mine, arguing that I was incorrect to ascribe to Arendt what she calls a "naturalistic" vision of action.[1] I still stand by my earlier argument. But my point was that while Arendt argues that action emerges spontaneously out of the human condition, *her own writings* continually undermine this argument in multiple ways. Elsewhere, I have argued that this process of self-contradiction was actually integral to Arendt's efforts to traverse the gulf between human understanding and the complexities of lived reality.[2] But I was not particularly clear about this in the essay Levinson cites. In any case, I think there are more interesting differences in our perspectives on Arendt.

First, our essays seem to focus on two fundamentally different populations. From the beginning of her essay, Levinson concentrates on what I would character-ize as relative elites. Thus, she begins her essay by discussing the problems that arise when those who are not bullied fail to intervene on behalf of those who are. And her two major examples, of Sergeant Schmidt and the Danish People in World War Two, are of those who did intervene on behalf of the oppressed. This question of how we can encourage the relatively privileged to see themselves as a part of a common world with those who are more oppressed is crucial to a field like education, where most teachers of poor students of color are white, middle-class women. In fact, I would argue that the shadow of the Coleman Report still darkens our classrooms. How many times have you heard from a preservice teacher, "It's the parents' fault. What do you expect me to do?" Levinson's essay seems to grapple, in part, with teachers' tendency not to see themselves as potentially effective agents in a world outside of their control.

My own focus is much different. Unlike most of you, I teach in a community education program with few teacher education candidates. My students are mostly older students of color trying to finally finish their college education. The core class I teach is not foundations but community organizing. I do not work much in schools—instead I work with multiracial citizen action groups. I am less interested, therefore, in how to get relatively elite teachers to act for the oppressed, and more focused on the different ways marginalized groups can act to gain power.

Thus, while Levinson's essay seems to stress questions of ethics (*why* should we act?), mine tends to address more pragmatic questions of action (what are the different *ways* we can act?). And this difference between us may reflect deeper class distinctions in the way different groups conceptualize political action. For example, Fred Rose has recently argued that middle-class professionals tend to focus on a politics of principle and on the achievement of broad ideals, whereas working-class groups tend to stress more pragmatic, practical, concrete goals.[3] In fact, I have argued elsewhere that Arendt's model of the "public" is an extremely problematic approach to collective action, reflecting an essentially privileged vision of the political with limited relevance to groups with more pragmatic concerns.[4]

It should not be surprising, then, that our recommendations are quite different. In the service of a largely Arendtian model of ethical engagement, Levinson rejects my recommendation that schools engage students in actual practices of political action. She argues that schools are places where attempts to engage in actual political action are likely to lead only to the "tyranny of the most vocal student." Furthermore, creating exercises that eliminate such problems, and thus merely pretend to engage in free political action "is equally problematic insofar as it gives students the illusion that fairness and tolerance are natural outgrowths of being-in-the-world."[5] The effort to promote action in schools, she argues "can be too artificial and ultimately too institutionally constrained to allow for the eruption of genuine action."

Instead, Levinson recommends an approach based on engagement with stories. Using stories, she argues, teachers can "illuminate both the moral consequences of our failure to act on behalf of others as well as attending to the moral possibilities— and pitfalls—of political action." Stories of political action, she argues, provide us with a library of memories that can prepare us for the nuanced challenges of action.

Levinson's point is well taken. I have, in fact, tended to obscure the importance of such stories in my focus on actual engagement in action. However, I think her dichotomy between "real" and "pretend" political action is too stark. Activities in schools are always guided by teachers, and are always somewhat artificial. The real question, which she partly acknowledges, is how one can balance these extremes, drawing from a range of models of action, only some of which (like Arendt's) contain any "illusion" of "fairness and tolerance." Furthermore, I would argue that her criticisms of what can happen to action in institutions like schools can be just as easily (perhaps more easily) applied to stories. Her discussion of students who were not particularly uplifted by yet another repetition of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech is, I would argue, a perfect example. Having worked with similar students, my bet is that the students were more than bored. Instead, like King scholar Michael Dyson, who has argued for a national moratorium on King's "Dream" speech, many marginalized students are quite aware of the hollowness of the limited aspect of King's larger vision articulated in his "Dream" speech given the political realities of our society.[6] The tendency of educators to focus on such "happy" visions of social change is reflective of attempts by status quo institutions to moderate and obscure more radical possibilities.

In fact, the cooptation and de-radicalization of educational reform by educational institutions has long represented a classic problem in the field. This challenge

has led me increasingly to focus in my work not on schools, but on the political and social context within which schools are situated, the ways in which schools might be subjected to political power, and on contexts beyond schools in which political education might take place. My approach may seem like a cop-out. But I am increasingly convinced that our tendency to focus narrowly on schools reflects a fundamental lack in the field, distorting our understanding of the nature of "community" and possibilities for collective action and more broad-based reform.

Furthermore, even when stories are not co-opted in schools, I have doubts about their ability, alone, to perform the kind of ethical function that Levinson imagines. Karl Kroeber, for example, argues that while narrative helps us understand our lives in retrospect, life itself is not lived as a narrative.[7] Thus, the potential for stories to foster ethical judgment, their very capacity to make sense of past contingencies of lived reality, may limit their ability to teach us how to actually engage in these contingencies as we live them.

And can we really separate the practical and the ethical? Without practical avenues, how is one to actually act on one's ethical commitments? How is one to imagine oneself as a responsible member of a common world with few skills for acting on these beliefs?

I think Levinson is right that a focus on stories as a tool for ethical education is crucial, and it is something I have tended to downplay. But I am convinced that such "ethical" readings of stories, by themselves, are a dead end.[8] Instead, I think that Levinson's work and mine have the potential to work in synergy. Efforts to promote opportunities for political action (writ broadly) can support efforts to engage ethically with stories of action, and vice versa. Together, each approach may reduce the danger that the other will be transformed into pabulum by the institution of schooling.

1. Aaron Schutz, "Is Political Education an Oxymoron? Hannah Arendt's Resistance to Public Spaces in Schools," in *Philosophy of Education 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002): 324-32.

2. Aaron Schutz, "Theory as Performative Pedagogy: Three Masks of Hannah Arendt," *Educational Theory* 51, no. 2 (2001): 127-51.

3. Fred Rose, "Toward a Class-Cultural Theory of Social Movements: Reinterpreting New Social Movements," *Sociological Forum* 12, no. 3 (1997): 461-93. Rose notes that some approaches (like Arendt's, I would argue) draw from a professional culture and involve "a positive affirmation of new values resulting from growing affluence," 471. See also Paul Lichterman, *The Search for Political Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

4. See Aaron Schutz, "Creating Local 'Public Spaces' in Schools: Insights from Hannah Arendt and Maxine Greene," *Curriculum Inquiry* 29, no. 1 (1999): 77-98. Interestingly, one of Levinson's major examples, the collective action of the Dutch, seems to represent more a model of hierarchical solidarity than Arendt's "public" politics.

5. See, for example, Saul Alinsky, *A Reville for Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969) and Lichterman, *The Search for Political Community*.

6. Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King* (New York: Free Press, 2000).

7. Aaron Schutz, "Caring in Schools is not Enough: Community, Narrative, and the Limits of Alterity," *Educational Theory* 48, no. 3 (1998): 373-94.

8. Karl Kroeber, *Rereading/Retelling* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).