On Making Things Difficult for Learners

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In a memorable passage in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Søren Kierkegaard tells a story about the origins of his desire to become a philosopher.[1] He begins by relating a tale, rich in Socratic irony, of the "fortunate lot of Dr. Hartspring" who, at Streit's Hotel in Hamburg, "by a miracle (of which the waiters were unaware) became an adherent of the Hegelian philosophy which assumes that there are no miracles." In contrast, Kierkegaard's conversion occurs in the open air at a cafe in the Fredriksberg Garden while he smokes a cigar, "thinking and idling" and ruminating on what he describes as the "glittering inactivity" of his early life. "So there I sat and smoked my cigar until I lapsed into thought."

It occurs to him at this point that he is in danger of living his life into old age "without being anything." When he looks at what others have accomplished, he is struck by the sudden realization that most people have become benefactors of mankind by making life easier and easier, "some by railways, others by omnibuses and steamboats, others by the telegraph, others by easily apprehended compendiums and short recitals of everything worth knowing, and finally the true benefactors of the age who make spiritual existence in virtue of thought easier and easier, yet more and more significant."[2] In pondering on this matter, Kierkegaard derives an intriguing and strikingly contrary direction and purpose for his own life to follow:

> Out of love for mankind, and out of despair at my embarrassing situation, seeing that I had accomplished nothing and was unable to make anything easier than it had already been made, and moved by a genuine interest in those who make everything easy, I conceived it as my task to create difficulties everywhere.[3]

Now, it seems to me that Kierkegaard's message can be read not merely as fundamental to the task of the philosopher, but as a profoundly important insight into the nature of teaching, learning, and curriculum.

This may seem a rather surprising claim considering the widespread view that education should be a matter of making things as easy as possible for learners: that teachers should facilitate and curriculum planners should, in a familiar turn of phrase, "adapt content so that it can be more readily understood by learners." I wish to argue, however, that these two contrasting themes — making things easy and making things difficult — though they may seem contradictory, are essential to understanding educational processes. They represent, as it were, two essential parts of the same educational processes. The facilitator can only facilitate if the material is difficult, relative to the learner. It would be an unnecessary task to facilitate easy material. Making the curriculum difficult, or more challenging, is the proper role of the teacher, in the latter case.[4]

The task of making things easy — through facilitative teaching and guides to learning — is, unsurprisingly, the dominant view. The arrow of instruction seems to point from difficult to easy, rather than pointing both ways. Similarly, the dominant

view of curriculum favors a well-laid-out plan rather than processes of discovery. In this essay, I wish to explore why this is the case and, at the same time, make a case for greater prominence of the alternative vision. I wish, that is, to explore the idea expressed in Kierkegaard's epiphany on his life's meaning, that an important part of education is to make things difficult rather than easy.

This is a view that finds eloquent expression in the work of the phenomenologist, Michel Serres. "Do schoolmasters realize," asks Serres, "that they only fully taught those they thwarted, or rather, completed, those they forced to cross? Certainly, I have never learned anything unless I left, not taught someone else without inviting them to leave the nest."[5]

The idea of making learning difficult rather than a straightforward easy matter may seem a piece of academic perversity, but the conception of learning as a difficult journey has had a long and honorable history. Socrates' approach to teaching, for example, is counter to the popular modern notion that the teacher should be a guide or facilitator, although the metaphor of the teacher as a guide is also present in Plato's version of the teacher in the Parable of the Cave.[6] While professing his own ignorance, Socrates aimed to uncover false or premature claims to knowledge in others. His relentless interrogation of Athenian citizens demonstrated that the truth is more difficult to attain than his interlocutors supposed. For many of those he engaged in his conversations, Socrates' path was too demanding, and his persistence unwelcome. His task was not to make things easier for people; it was, rather, by means of a rigorous questioning of the subject, to show that the path to wisdom is a long, arduous, up-hill battle.

Philosophers have, of course, not been entirely closed to the idea that teaching involves throwing down challenges for learners.[7] Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of overcoming is suggestive of the requirement that we must depart from familiar territory in order to embrace the strange and new. He writes, "The man who seeks knowledge must be able not only to love his enemies but also to hate his friends."[8] This is prescription that entails overcoming familiar beliefs and values as well as embracing ideas and principles that do not easily fit in with those beliefs that we take for granted. The idea that pedagogy entails a departure from the comfortable, familiar world of the learner begins with a notion that one should be in some state of wonder or perplexity regarding a subject.[9] As Thomas Kuhn describes in his theory of paradigm shifts, people often conduct their lives and business like scientists engaged in normal science until the weight of conflicting evidence becomes too great and leads to a revolution in their thinking and beliefs.[10] Perplexity may be a good starting point, but what leads people to act on it and once they have started their journey to follow it through? In Arthur Schopenhauer's words, such a task "forces an enemy into the previously closed system of our own convictions,… demands new efforts of us, and declares our former efforts to have been in vain."[11]

I wish to argue in this essay that our conceptions of educational processes are too focused on routines that are designed to make things easy. Or to put it in Kuhnian language, too concerned with the everyday matter of doing "normal" education rather than conceiving of it as a process that entails some risk, a journey into

uncharted territory. In other words, we conceive of education too readily in terms of the processes of familiarization rather than its opposite, of making things easy as opposed to making things difficult.

On the one hand, the theme of familiarization, the process of making the strange familiar, suggests that teaching, learning, and the curriculum are processes that involve charting or pursuing an established path with clear lines of reference. On the other hand, the theme of estrangement, of making the familiar strange, suggests processes that work in the opposite manner. I am not, therefore, claiming simply that education should be made difficult for students, but that our conceptualization of educational processes should take account of both familiarization and its opposite, which I shall call, for want of a better word, "estrangement."

In what follows, two versions of educational processes, in particular, are connected to this standpoint that things should be made easy rather than hard: the idea of curriculum as a map and the concept of the teacher as a facilitator. The metaphor of the map and of the teacher as a guide are deeply embedded in our conceptual language of educational processes. In the first section, I would like to take a look at curriculum theories — especially those informed by epistemology and psychology — that conceive of the task of theory in terms of mapping out the curriculum field. This sense of curricular purpose, as I shall argue, may be understood as tied to the idea of familiarization — the matter of laying out the route in advance for other to follow, like a morning commute, rather than an expedition into unexplored territory. In the second section, I wish to explore a related notion: the idea of the teacher as a guide and the connection between this metaphor and the concept of the teacher as a facilitator. I shall limit my discussion in this section to the special case of the teaching/learning relationship — that between mentor and protégé.

Curriculum Theories

The image of the map is one of the foundational ideas or grounding metaphors of a certain, dominant way of looking at curriculum. It also animates curriculum practice. Maps are representations — they are useful as guides to action. They point the way to newcomers and, in essence, make unfamiliar routes easier to follow. The field of curriculum is rife with eager map-makers and model builders. It is a conception that has an enormous and long-established appeal in curriculum studies. It is connected to the idea that the teacher is a facilitator or guide, and that learning is a matter of following a path laid out beforehand by teachers and curriculum developers. Theories of the curriculum informed by epistemology, psychology, and recapitulation theory share a similar project: a desire to map out a route for teachers and students to follow.

Familiar figures espouse this view. Joseph Schwab, for example, speaks of making a map of the disciplines;[12] Paul Hirst offers a representational schema of different forms of knowledge which he argues is fundamental to the idea of liberal education.[13] Epistemologists also talk of mind as if it were a matter of geopolitical analysis: R. G. Collingwood, for example, speaks of a *speculum mentis* or map of knowledge;[14] Ernst Cassirer, of mankind's various symbolic systems;[15] and Michael

Oakeshott, of independent modes of experience.[16] Some psychological theories also reveal a similar deference to the metaphor of the map, offering representations of the mind such as Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs;[17] J.P. Guilford's structure of the intellect;[18] Jean Piaget's structural model of cognitive functioning;[19] and, more recently, Howard Gardner's conception of the forms of intelligence.[20]

What is the source of this metaphor? It is, I think, related to the idea of mind as a representational system.[21] But there is a difference: whereas epistemologists and psychologists may proceed to construct a representational view of the mind, curriculum theorists wish to take these theories as maps for the further purpose of guiding educational processes. A representation of the mind becomes a curriculum map when it is used to plot a course for learners.

Schwab is aware of the arduous nature of this task. For example,

> We embark here on an exploration of one of the most difficult of terrains: investigation of the nature, variety, and extent of human knowledge; and the attempt to determine what that nature, variety, and extent have to tell us about teaching and learning. My share of this task is a specific one and a preliminary one. It is simply to map that terrain.[22]

Mapping the terrain, Schwab tells us, is a simple matter; the challenge lies in applying the map to teaching and learning.

In relation to curriculum theory, epistemology and psychology can be considered as outsider theories; that is, they are formulated specifically within their own domain either as theories of knowledge or theories of mental development even as they contain "maps." On this view, curriculum theory can be understood as applied epistemology or applied psychology or even a bit of both. A similar dynamic exists in literary theory where various outsider disciplines may be called on to analyze a text. Outsider theories, as Jerome Bruner argues, are the tools of those who look at an activity from the outside and often with a sort of "God's-eye" view. He explains,

> [They] may be anchored wherever: in psychoanalysis, in structural linguistics, in a theory of memory, in philosophy of history. Armed with an hypothesis the top-down partisan swoops on this text and that, searching for instances (and less often counter-instances) of what he hopes will be a right "explanation." It is a powerful way to work but it instills habits of work that risk producing results that are insensitive to the contexts in which they were dug up.[23]

Well-formed theories of knowledge and of psychological development are often used as maps of the curriculum. But this notion introduces a problem, for what began as a purely descriptive conception of the mind is now taken as a prescription for action. The temptation is to extend this problematic view of mind: first, by conceiving of a map of the mind; secondly, by embracing the idea of the map as a functional entity that can be applied as a blueprint for the development of other minds.

What lies behind the assumption that epistemology and curriculum are related as pure understanding is to applied understanding? The answer is the belief that it is the task of philosophy to license knowledge claims, and related, the project of constructing, in Collingwood's phrase, a "map of knowledge."

As Richard Rorty points out, post-Kantian philosophy has accustomed us to the idea that philosophers are in the business of establishing the foundations of

knowledge: "We owe the notion of philosophy as a tribunal of pure reason, upholding or denying the claims of the rest of culture, to the Eighteenth Century and especially to Kant."[24] Moreover, analytic philosophy represents a more recent version of this project. Again here is Rorty, "Analytic philosophy is one more variant of Kantian philosophy, a variant marked principally by thinking of representation as linguistic rather than 'transcendental' critique, or psychology as the discipline which exhibits the foundations of knowledge."[25] The analytic version of epistemology has been particularly influential in recent educational thinking. It has helped to shape a conception of epistemology that informs curriculum practices by identifying what is legitimate to teach. In other words, this is by providing a map of the disciplines as distinct from a map of knowledge.

The Kantian version of this doctrine is psychological in orientation and offers a version of the structure of knowledge — a mental map of the structure of knowledge that can be used as an organizational schema for the curriculum. If this is how the mind structures knowledge then this is how it should be organized for instruction. Analytic philosophy, in contrast, locates the structure of knowledge in the social world. Examples of this latter approach are represented by Michael Oakeshott's "modes of experience" and Paul Hirst's "forms of knowledge." The direction of linguistic analyses therefore points towards a conception of knowledge that is discipline specific — an increasingly pluralistic view of knowledge, still informed by philosophy, but separated into different sub-categories such as the philosophy of science, social science, history, and other "philosophies of." Hirst makes the argument that a positive conceptualization of the forms of knowledge, one that is consistent with analytic philosophy and the idea that the structures of knowledge is located in the social world, is essential to the conceptualization of liberal education and is the idea of "an education based fairly and squarely on the nature of knowledge."[26] Curriculum theorists Arthur King and John Brownell defend a similar position:

> We defined intellect as the schooled capacity for knowing accomplished through mastery of symbolic systems. We further asserted that the processes and products of man's symbolic efforts to make his experiences with the world intelligible are the disciplines of knowledge. The prime claim of the intellect, then is best met in the schools where the disciplines of knowledge are the fundamental content of the curriculum — its resources and responsibilities.[27]

Cognitive and developmental psychology add their own conceptions of structure, their own maps of the mind, to curriculum theory and practice. Thus, curriculum theorizing from the psychological point of view can be taken, much as epistemological curriculum thinking, as an applied art. Psychological theories, like Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, for example, offer curriculum theorists a developmental map of the mind and its various forms of cognitive functioning.[28]

Finally, recapitulation theory, the view that learning a subject follows roughly the same plot line as the story of its discovery, also offers a view of the curriculum with a built-in map; but instead of a map of the subject it is a map of the development of the subject.

Knowledge and learning, however, do not necessarily come from following a well-traveled path; such processes often require a struggle to a commitment to launch oneself into new territory (to borrow from the image of map-making) and enterprises. Socratic method and Heideggerian "openness to strangeness" are alternative visions that develop the theme of making things difficult, of leaving the well-traveled path in the interests of discovery. Choosing the path less traveled — an image usually attributed to Robert Frost — is also developed by John Dewey, who points out that thinking often begins with a "forked road" situation.[29]

Further, the idea of an encounter with strangeness or with a stranger and of the consequent struggle to understand an alien idea is integral to this conception of the curriculum.[30] Kuhn's idea of a paradigm shift introduces a related notion of revolutionary change as a disconnect with the familiar — with new ideas that do not fit in with widely held theories. The progressive advance of science depends on people abandoning comfortably held views for new theoretical commitments, often held, at least initially, at a price.

This confrontation with the strange or the stranger — with ideas that do not fit in or with a person who is not obliged to think the way we do or view the world from our perspective — presents us with another way to look at the curriculum, as something that is not mapped out in advance but as an exploration of new territory. For example, the stranger challenges us to explain or justify our own position. By formulating an answer we are led to explore our own assumptions more deeply and perhaps, critically: the view that is dramatically portrayed in Nietzsche's demand that in the search for knowledge we should not merely embrace our enemies, but also reject our friends. In the struggle to accommodate what is strange and new, we endeavor to bring incommensurable perspectives together through a process of convergence. Hans-Georg Gadamer uses the image of the merging of horizons to describe how this can be possible. It is a hermeneutical process that is dialogical in form, and is characteristic of the kind of thinking that is embodied in historical understanding.[31]

MENTORING

The ideal of the teacher as a guide and facilitator is so ingrained in our modern conception of the teacher that the word "facilitate" has become synonymous with "teach." In this section, I would like to call the equation of these two terms into question and expose the limitations of the view by exploring the opposite theme — the idea that the teacher should make things difficult for learners. I will confine myself to a discussion of a more limited form of the teacher-student relationship — that between a mentor and protégé. In general, the idea of the mentor is taken to mean that of a friendly advisor, after the character who gave his name to the role. But a closer look at the Odyssey reveals that the task of Mentor is not simply to make things easy for Telemachus. Part of the skill of the mentor is knowing when to help and knowing when to let go. Telemachus must demonstrate the true qualities of leadership by seeking out his father and so "win the praise of men." He must show "kleos" — that is, he must show a true account of himself and gain a good reputation. He must do this on his own, although Pallas Athene, in the shape of Mentor, has

power to act on his behalf. Although at times she is actively engaged in the action, at other times she stands back in order to let Telemachus "show his stuff." For example, during the thick of battle in Book Twenty-Two, during the slaughter of the suitors, she assumes the shape of a swallow and flies up to the rafters as a passive observer of the fight. As the text reads, "Athene did not yet grant them victory, but continued to put the strength of Odysseus and his noble son to the test."[32]

In mentoring situations, it is often necessary for the mentor to withhold help, to present a challenging situation, or to add new expectations and require higher standards from their protégé. This example should be familiar to any teacher who has struggled with the decision of whether to step in and help or let his students face the struggle alone so that they are free to learn from their mistakes. Sometimes, learning involves taking an independent route that crosses over into unknown territory. And sometimes learning may be achieved by thwarting the desires and challenging the practices of the learner, as Serres claims.[33]

Conclusion

The idea of making a choice, of taking a risk, of a "leap of faith" is inextricably connected to this idea of education as an exploration of new territory, of learning as a journey without the use of a map. How can learners be invited to leave the nest, to court the unfamiliar and strange?

To leave the nest, to make the sort of sacrifice that entails a departure from one's zone of comfort, to travel a new path and resolutely disconnect oneself from all that is familiar and comfortable requires an act of courage — a leap into the unknown. To what extent is learning? How much do we as educator's place limits on bold actions like this, and seek instead to find a comfortable familiar route that is free of risk to the learner? How much easier is it to give an answer than leave the inquirer to struggle with the question?

Kierkegaard's view is that the greater part of human effort and ingenuity is given over to making life easy. Based on the actions of inventors, scientists, thinkers, and educators, it would seem that modern life is all about making things easy rather than difficult: teaching is a process of familiarization; curriculum is a map. But in order to accomplish the task of clearing a path for others to follow, inventors, scientists and others must have first pioneered the path. The typical human failing is that we wish our journey to be taken as a model for others. Why dwell on the laborious business of rediscovery, when we can map out what we have discovered and save others the inconvenience of making the same trip?

We tend to be complacent creatures who love our present state which we count as comfortable. What does it take to shake ourselves out of this complacency and make us hazard a trip into new territory? What does it take to shake ourselves free, to challenge assumptions and question what we take for granted? Such actions usually entail a cost.

In this essay, I have argued that we leave no space for these important processes if we do not also include the process of estrangement, of making the familiar strange, in our conceptions of curriculum and teaching. Such processes are connected with

those of problematization, of questioning what we take for granted and feel most comfortable with, of discovery, inquiry, problem-based learning, and the Socratic method. The idea that unites these different strands is that our edification is not simply a matter of initiating people into what is already known, tried and tested, and formulated; it may instead present a challenge or offer the students an experience that disrupts their equilibrium and leads them to look at things more deeply.

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments,* ed. E.H. Hong and H.V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

2. Ibid., 165.

3. Ibid.

4. This is implicit in Vygotsky's idea of the zone of proximal development.

5. Michel Serres, *The Troubadour of Knowledge* (Lansing: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 7.

6. Plato, *Republic*, Book VII (New York: Vintage Classics, 1991).

7. For example, Macmillan and Garrison base their conception of teaching on answering questions in the mind of students rather than providing them with information. See C.J.B. Macmillan and James W. Garrison, *A Logical Theory of Teaching* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1988).

8. Freidrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1979).

9. R.W. Hepburn, *Wonder* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1984).

10. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

11. Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1976), 124.

12. J.J. Schwab, "The Structure of the Disciplines — Meanings and Significances*,*" in *The Structure of Knowledge and the Curriculum* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), 1-30.

13. Paul H. Hirst, "Liberal Education and the Forms of Knowledge." In *The Philosophy of Education,* ed. R.S. Peters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 87-111.

14. R.G. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924).

15. Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944).

16. Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933).

17. Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Addison Wesley, 1987).

18. Joy Paul Guilford, *The Nature of Human Intelligence* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1967).

19. Jean Piaget, *The Psychology of the Child,* trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Basic Books, 1969).

20. Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

21. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

22. Schwab, *Structure of Disciplines*, 6.

23. Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 9-10.

24. Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*, 4.

25. Ibid., 6.

26. Hirst, "Liberal Education and the Forms of Knowledge," 87.

27. A.R. King, Jr. and J.A. Brownell, *The Curriculum and the Disciplines of Knowledge* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1966), 37.

28. Today schools are following Gardner's map and base their curriculum on the distinct kinds of human intelligence.

29. John Dewey, *How We Think* (Boston: DC Heath Co, 1910), 11.

30. Douglas Barnes, *From Communication to Curriculum* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1976).

31. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* trans. Garrett Barden and William Glen-Doepel (London: Seabury Press, 1975).

32. Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book 22, trans. E.V. Rieu (London: Methuen, 1952).

33. Serres, *Troubadour of Knowledge*, 7.