

No Pain, No Gain?

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Hunter McEwan's essay represents the time-honored philosophical practice of calling received doctrines into question. In education, this often takes the forms of asking what reasons we have to believe in some dogma and of asking just what practices are envisioned by a corresponding slogan. McEwan challenges the dogma that teachers should make student learning easier. The idea that teachers should make learning easier has intuitive appeal, but he makes a case that ease sometimes shortchanges learners. He critiques construction of curricular maps, calling instead for having students discover their own way to understanding. I support and extend McEwan's critique of ease, but challenge the link he draws between "maps" and undesirable learning ease.

Lurking behind McEwan's argument is a view of education, like John Dewey's, that abhors the mechanical, the thoughtless, the inflexible, the routine. The problem with ease is not some Spartan or sadomasochistic repulsion of ease itself, but a concern that pursuit of ease may represent a sacrifice of future benefits. I suspect that McEwan, like Dewey, values educational practices that create greater capacity for making connections, for entertaining a wider array of possible actions, for further growth. He worries that making things easy for students will lead to some dead end, which may be comfortable, but somehow less fulfilling.

Philosophers often bash educational practice without offering evidence that the practices they deplore are as prevalent as they assert. Recent research, however, does document that U.S. teachers shy away from letting students struggle. Analysis of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) videotapes shows that American teachers do indeed try to make things easy for students, thereby reducing their chances of understanding the subjects they study.¹ In a nationally representative sample of eighth grade mathematics classes, American teachers introduce new material by showing students a method they can use to solve a new problem type. Their goal is to make the solution method clear and easy for students to duplicate. Even more telling, whenever students experience difficulty in working a problem, teachers are quick to help them solve the problem, either by showing them how to do the problem or by pointing out the connection to the method already presented. Never do the teachers allow the student to struggle. In Japanese classrooms, in contrast, much of the class period is taken up with groups of students trying to work problems which seem different from any for which they already know the solution. Teachers welcome students' struggles to figure out what to do. Although many factors undoubtedly go into differences in student achievement, this difference in instruction appears to be one explanation for higher achievement by the Japanese. The TIMSS tapes show that making things easy for students does frequently occur and can lead to mechanical learning, where students learn a set of rules, but only for the narrow set of problems posed in the curriculum.

Just as educators say that teachers should make learning easy, they also call for making learning meaningful, making educational programs coherent, making learning continuous with ordinary experience. All these pronouncements have surface appeal. Who would argue the opposite, that education should be meaningless, incoherent, disconnected?

A closer look at practices associated with meaningfulness, coherence, and continuity, however, reveals approaches to teaching that encourage students to remain parochial and narrowminded. When science content is made meaningful by showing its consistency with what students already understand, students have little chance to learn perspectives that could transform their perceptions. When educational programs seek coherence by ensuring that every course reinforces one perspective, students have no chance to appreciate the vital diversity of views about the subjects they study. When students are encouraged to see literature as representations of their own lives, they miss the imaginative transport to places and people far away, foreign, exotic.²

For all of these terms, associated practices may make learning comfortable for students by never asking them to go far beyond their current intellectual positions. Making learning easy, meaningful, and so on can be an excuse for failing to push for riskier practices that lead to adventure, struggle, and romance. The practices can emphasize learning that fits into established student conceptions (what Piaget calls assimilation) at the expense of learning that requires a reconceptualization (Piaget's accommodation). These pleas for ease are conservative admonitions, in the sense that they discourage practices that would lead to major change in what a student knows.

Still, making learning easier has attractions. Could the resolution be that the problem with "ease" and the other terms is that they may obscure a shift toward "easier" content, but that it would be all right to make learning easy if the focus continued to be on broadening goals? I think so. McEwan gives us a necessary (remember the TIMSS tapes) reminder that avoiding difficult material denies students pathways to growth. But what is wrong with making it easier for students to explore new domains? (If we really wanted to make things hard for students, we could turn out the lights and take away their pencils.)

While agreeing with McEwan that making learning easy has its costs, I do not agree that maps or representations make learning easy in deleterious ways. McEwan says that maps and other representations of content do students a disservice because they take students along without giving them experiences of discovery. But is that what using a map does? Cannot a map also give an orientation needed as a basis for exploration? Or cannot it aid in seeing places one might get to, without removing the difficulty of actually making the journey. Perhaps a map will reveal the mountain passes that permit entry (still strenuous) into new territory. Without the map, the traveler could wander for years without getting beyond what has already been explored. McEwan's objection might be better directed against teaching as leading a tour group, where sights are seen through a dirty bus window as a tour director drones on about the buildings streaming by.

McEwan also seems to be talking about maps being bad for students, but the quotes he uses from the likes of Dewey and Joseph Schwab portray maps as positive tools for teachers. The point is not to give students a ready made map of the subject matter, but to help teachers see where students have gotten to and where they might be induced to go. That does not mean making the trek “easy” for students, it means having ideas about how students could, in a reasonable amount of time, get from where they are to somewhere else. Maps make it possible to take difficult trips.

How far would McEwan take the argument that teachers should make learning difficult? As a presenter at the PES Annual Meeting, McEwan is a teacher, with those of us in his audience students. Does he try to make learning hard for us? Does he insist that we discover his insights on our own? I do not think so. Does his argument suggest that he should? On the surface it seems to. Perhaps an examination of specific ideas about learning will reveal how teachers can help students do work that is easy enough, yet still learn to learn things that seem hard to them. In a similar way, McEwan’s efforts to make his ideas clear to his readers may be seen as an attempt to hold on to the goal of grasping ideas that readers initially find difficult. Teachers and essay presenters may seek to make learning easier, without shifting to simpler content.

Instruction based on Lev Vygotsky’s concept of the Zone of Proximal Development offers one way of thinking about how a teacher could make things easy, but not too easy, for students. Vygotsky asserts that growth typically takes place in a zone where a child can do a task with adult guidance, but not independently.³ By helping students to do tasks in the zone, teachers give them practice that eventually leads to the capacity for independent work. For instance, students might not, on their own, be able to ask questions that probe the validity of an argument. But they might be able to do so with prompting from a teacher. If so, that task is in the Zone. By asking students to work on tasks that they cannot do independently, the teacher is making learning hard. By guiding them through the task, the teacher makes completing the task easier. The result is that the students gain capacity for independent work.

Lest it appear that McEwan’s position requires accepting a single learning theory, I note that other research on learning also suggests that academic tasks should not be too easy. Research from the 1970s on Academic Learning Time showed that kids made the most progress when working on tasks of moderate difficulty — somewhere between things they could already do easily and things that were debilitatingly difficult and strange.⁴

Reminders of the dangers of ease, meaningfulness, coherence, and continuity are made periodically. They gain some support, but then seem to be once more forgotten. Why is that? Perhaps there is a natural tendency in the education system to move toward the mechanical. Is it intellectual laziness, as Dewey suggests in *How We Think*?⁵ Is this like water flowing down to the lowest level? Perhaps this is another instance of the pattern of teachers and students making an implicit bargain that students will show up and be cooperative if the teachers do not demand too much of them.⁶

Some things are difficult to learn. They should not for that reason be avoided. But neither should teachers avoid instructional practices and curriculum designs simply because they make learning easier. If worthwhile educational goals can be achieved more easily, perhaps students can gain without pain.

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1. James W. Stigler and James Hiebert, *The Teaching Gap: Best Ideas from the World's Teachers for Improving Education in the Classroom* (New York: Free Press, 1999).
 2. Robert E. Floden, Margret Buchmann, and John R. Schwille, "Breaking With Everyday Experience," *Teachers College Record* 88, no. 4 (1987): 485-506; Margret Buchmann and Robert E. Floden "Coherence: The Rebel Angel," *Educational Researcher* 21, no. 9 (1992): 4-9; Margret Buchmann and Robert E. Floden, *Detachment and Concern: Conversations in the Philosophy of Teaching and Teacher Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993).
 3. Lev Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, ed. Michael Cole et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).
 4. Charles W. Fisher, "Academic Learning Time," in *International Encyclopedia of Teaching and Teacher Education*, ed. Lorin Anderson (Tarrytown, NY: Elsevier Science, Inc., 1995), 430-33.
 5. John Dewey, *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1933).
 6. See Arthur E. Powell, Eleanor Farrar, and David K. Cohen, eds., *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985); Michael Sedlak, Christopher Wheeler, Diana Pullin, and Philip Cusick, *Selling Students Short: Classroom Bargains and Academic Reform in the American High School* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986).