

Toward a More Democratic Approach to Sexuality Education

Constance M. Yowell
University of Illinois at Chicago

Sexuality education, although an urgent need of students, has been sorely overlooked by philosophers of education. Limited work has been done to offer conceptually rigorous or thoughtful analyses of the ideological issues at the center of sexuality curriculum development. Michelle Fine has suggested that, in part, this limited attention to sexuality education is due to a “growing national conservatism” that restricts our language and banishes to the private sphere what were once public debates concerning the ambiguities of sexuality education.¹ In the context of these constraints and neglect, Cris Mayo’s essay represents an important and critical interruption of the silences that are often fostered through our current social and educational policies. Mayo thoughtfully identifies the relations between social policy, social context, and individual agency. She offers an analysis of the ways in which current approaches to sexuality education ignore the everyday understanding and fluidity of students’ sexual experiences, and in so doing may actually lead to the consequences that these policies are intended to avoid — increased and unprotected sexual activity.

Mayo points us to three “moments ripe for the philosophical picking,” 1) the version of sexuality expressed through this welfare reform policy, 2) how education [is] used to shape sexuality, and 3) the messages about race, class, and gender inherent in these messages. I agree that this deconstruction of our educational and social policies is critical to a thoughtful analysis of sexuality education. I would suggest, however, that this analysis overlooks the philosophical and ethical traditions that guide our educational response to sexuality.

Historically, the educational response to adolescent sexuality has largely been limited to a struggle between abstinence-based programs (for example, Sex Respect) and contraceptive-based programs (for example, Health Belief Model).² Deconstructing these programs provides us with important knowledge concerning their strengths and weaknesses. Deconstruction does not, however, provide us with the ideological guidance necessary for understanding the purposes of sexuality education. Consequently, when Mayo suggests that sexuality education ought to include student sexual subjectivities, or “attempt to describe sexual activity that does not lead to unintended pregnancy,” we are informed of the general direction sexuality education ought to take, but it is not clear why we should follow this route. Without an analysis of the philosophical tenets underlying sexuality education we have little insight into why we ought to choose specific approaches, or why we ought to provide sexuality education at all. I will spend the remainder of this response briefly outlining the ideological issues that I believe are embedded in Mayo’s analysis of sexuality education and welfare reform policy, and raise ideological considerations for future curriculum development.

First, I would suggest that the problems Mayo has identified with current sexuality education and welfare policy are the legacy of communitarian and utilitarian approaches to educational reform. Briefly, those committed to traditional conceptions of community, what calls “traditional communitarianism” emphasize traditional values, roles, and responsibilities.³ Represented in the contemporary work of Allan Bloom and William Bennett, traditional communitarians argue that “social harmony [is] possible when individuals act in accordance with specified, complementary, and hierarchically arranged roles.”⁴ Rather than articulate a concern with individual desires, or the protection of human rights, traditional communitarians such as Bloom have argued that it is because of our emphasis on relativism and individualism that we have lost our ties to the past, to traditional values, and ultimately to a shared sense of the public good.⁵

Educational theorists have argued that a traditional communitarian approach to educational policy and curricula demonstrates a limited capacity to respond to issues of diversity, varying visions of the “good,” and possibilities for change. When Mayo criticizes our current welfare policy for offering only one standard of sexual activity, and suggests that through these policies women are co-opted into the state household where a public patriarchy demands chastity, she is offering an implicit critique of traditional communitarian ideology. Similarly, the recouping of status through secondary virginity and the legitimizing of culturally determined characteristics such as obedience, passivity, and compliance for girls, while calling for no such qualities in boys, is a reification of the hierarchically arranged roles, as well as the norms and values that traditional communitarians have historically argued ought to be at the center of the “good society.”

Despite traditional communitarian static and inflexible understandings of individual needs for growth, this ideological paradigm does raise important issues for sexuality educators to consider. Mayo has critiqued curricular programs such as Sex Respect for their inability to account for social elements of desire and sexuality. Consequently, the curriculum does not (and cannot) attend to the new varieties of sexual identity that Mayo argues are the result of “gagging.” Ironically, despite its inability to attend to the consequences of the social forces it sets in place, the traditional communitarian perspective has historically argued that in our emphasis on the autonomous individual we have overlooked the role of community in shaping individual goals and qualities.

In constructivist discussions of sexuality education we have stressed the social nature of sexual desire, and the importance of individual agency — especially female sexual agency. However, what we have done less well is consistently analyze and articulate the interrelations and interdependence of the social elements of sexual desire, individual sexual agency, and community growth. Thus, while we have offered an important critique of the rigid nature of traditional communitarian ideology, and, consistent with John Dewey, have argued for the respect of diversity and the abandonment of fixed roles, we have not addressed the main concern of traditional communitarians: How does this respect for sexual diversity, the abandonment of fixed sexual roles, and the recognition of members dissenting from what

may be considered normative sexual practices foster community growth and enhance the public good? Responding to such a question requires us at least to turn to the ideological commitments of democratic communitarians such as Dewey. Before making this ideological turn, however, it is first necessary to assess the legacy of utilitarian approaches to sexuality education.

Those who argue for the inclusion of contraception information and discussions of sexual activity in sexuality education curricula rarely frame their rhetoric in terms of the traditional communitarian concern for morality and virtue. Rather, the ideological rhetoric that accompanies these curricula is grounded in notions of efficiency, utility, and productivity. Utilitarians are concerned with the more relative issue of which sexual practices are most efficient for the greatest number of individuals. Decisions around efficiency tend to be determined within a rhetoric of social problem solving: How can we most efficiently manage sexual behavior? Or conversely, how can we ensure that sexual behavior does not interfere with productivity?

It is here, in its emphasis on social problem solving, that utilitarian ideology creates a troubled sexuality education curriculum, because it is here — as Mayo has noted — that utilitarians have conflated the issues of poverty, race, and teen pregnancy. In addition, because utilitarian ideology emphasizes the role of the individual and rational choice in its orientation toward progress, it also attributes responsibility for “problems” such as poverty (or inefficiencies) to the individual. Thus, at its best, utilitarian ideology leads us to the welfare reform policies and sexuality curriculum that Mayo has both identified and critiqued: policies that emphasize individual rather than structural change, and curriculum grounded in behavioral and rational choice models of education that seek to reconfigure students’ perceptions of their lived experiences.

Consistently, in our misguided utilitarian efforts to reduce poverty we look to women, especially young African American women, to sacrifice their passion, desire, and ultimately their sexual agency in order to increase economic productivity. It is not surprising that in such a model of sexuality education we find discourses that are grounded in the “technologies of the body,” and are incapable of accounting for the role of the community in shaping notions of sexual desire, pleasure, and even normative activity.

Thus, Mayo’s essay has brought us a critique of a social policy grounded in utilitarian ideology that turns to a traditional communitarian curriculum to solve “social problems.” What these ideologies highlight for us is the absolute critical need for sexuality education to grapple with the inherent tension and connectedness between the social and the individual. Unfortunately, the ideologies to which we turn for guidance provide us with an understanding of the social that is hierarchical, fixed, and disempowering, while our understanding of the individual as autonomous and rational denies the lived experiences and fluid identities of adolescents.

I would suggest that if we are in search of ideological guidance in resolving the tension between the social and the individual within sexuality education, democratic

communitarianism — while not providing solutions — may offer us insight into our choice of ideological cornerstones. I would like to offer two brief examples.

First, Dewey's democratic communitarianism underscores the processes through which individual desires and preferences both shape and are shaped by the community. With respect to sexuality education, then, we must analyze not only the ways in which social forces influence or constrain sexual identities, but also the ways in which sexual identities influence and constrain community growth. Given the traditional communitarian tendency to define community in terms of traditional roles and responsibilities, it becomes paramount to think through what a Deweyan conception of the "good community" means for sexuality education. Dewey has argued that two questions provide an internal and external test for the desirability of a community: "How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared?" and "How full and free is the interplay with other forms of association?"⁶ Certainly, this test of community desirability suggests an inherent value in sexual diversity. Such an ideological concern requires proponents of curriculum such as Sex Respect to reconsider their uniform standards for sexual behavior, as well as the role of sexual unorthodoxy in promoting individual and communal growth.

Second, in addition to providing us with ideological guideposts for broad conceptions of community, Dewey offers specific guidance with respect to curriculum. For example, Dewey argued that subject matter ought to be connected to students' life experiences, and furthermore, that it is the role of the teacher to assist students in making connections between their concrete daily experiences and the more organized knowledge of our disciplines.⁷ I see at least two implications for such a curricular approach to sexuality education. The first is the obvious importance of bringing students lived sexuality into classroom discussion. More importantly, however, is the issue of how, as educators, we go about helping students make sense of these experiences. What are the more organized, sexuality-relevant knowledge bases we want to move students toward? Consistent with Dewey, Sears has argued that "the real question [for sexuality educators] is what is the nature [and content] of the space between adult knowledge and childhood ignorance."⁸ I would suggest that we have done little to explore this space, and even less to understand how it is bridged.

Overall, it would seem that there is much work still to be done within the arena of sexuality education. If we can loosen ourselves from the ideological constraints of current approaches to sexuality education, there are exciting and critical issues that deserve and desperately need exploration.

1. L. Phillips and Michelle Fine, "What's 'Left' in Sexuality Education," in *Sexuality and the Curriculum: The Politics and Practices of Sexuality Education*, ed. J. Sears (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), 242-51, 243.

2. B. Miller and R. Paikoff, "Comparing Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Programs: Methods and Results," in *Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy: Model Programs and Evaluations*, eds. B. Miller, J. Card, R. Paikoff, and J. Peterson (London: Sage Publications, 1992), 256-75.

3. Kahne, *Reframing Educational Policy: Democracy, Community, and the Individual* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995), 31.

4. Ibid., 32.
5. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).
6. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1916).
7. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1938).
8. J. Sears, "Dilemmas and Possibilities of Sexuality Education: Reproducing the Body Politic," in *Sexuality and the Curriculum: The Politics and Practices of Sexuality Education*, ed. J. Sears (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), 246.