

Clarifying Education for Freedom

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At first glance, Jarrod Hanson's essay appears to be a fairly straightforward overview of competing notions of freedom and political systems. On a closer look, one comes to appreciate that Hanson has carefully chosen these basic comparisons to reveal complex and significant differences in the ways teachers might teach for freedom. Hanson's title, "Broadening Education for Freedom," does not truly reflect the content of his essay or the admirable intent of his main aim. While he does explore multiple definitions of freedom and political systems, his purpose does not seem to be to *broaden* our understanding of or approaches to educating for freedom. Instead, he calls for a clearer and more distinct relationship between the way teachers understand democracy and the way they educate for freedom. While he preserves some room for multiple definitions and connections, his project is actually one of narrowing and making more precise, rather than broadening. And this project, one of clarity and reflection, is a welcomed addition to current work in civics education.

I appreciate the way Hanson draws our attention to celebrated ways in which teachers supposedly engage freedom or democracy in their classrooms. He notes currently popular deliberative-aligned attempts to discuss controversial topics. I would add aggregative approaches like allowing students to vote on class activities. Many teachers are commended for the ways in which these practices render their classrooms democratic spaces. I am reminded here of the longstanding political propaganda technique of glittering generalities, which generates thoughtless endorsement from viewers by simply using highly valued concepts. In the educational context, whenever teachers invoke words or practices related to freedom or democracy, it seems that everyone is suddenly onboard without taking any time to stop to clarify these terms. Hanson does just that; he gives reason for pause and reflection by asking teachers to clarify the link between the systems of democracy they uphold and the resulting ways in which they are led to teach for freedom.

As Hanson begins to delineate the muddy ways in which political systems and notions of freedom interact, he rightly suggests that multiple and competing understandings of citizenship might be confusing to teachers. While he recognizes that some people believe these multiple understandings are actually beneficial, I fear that, at times, Hanson's efforts to clarify the link between political systems and notions of freedom may inadvertently suggest a limiting of the options. This may constrain the proliferation of discourses about citizenship, which are fundamental to a healthy democracy. Perhaps, however, it is worthwhile to consider ways in which these discourses should be constrained so that practice is clarified and improved. Amy Gutmann, for instance, might suggest her concurrence argument, which claims that students best learn how to be democratic citizens through participating in the norms and practices of a classroom that reflect the larger society. This argument would narrow viable options for conceiving of and teaching political

systems and freedom to those conceptions that are currently invoked in the surrounding society. While I doubt that Hanson would be content with this suggestion, even if it made the preparation of good citizens for the current way of life more efficient or certain, it is worthwhile to consider the scope of discourses which do exist and to what extent we need to take each seriously in our efforts to carve out clarity.

Recognition of the proliferation of discourses on democracy leads me to concerns with power. Political contexts entail battles over power. This power includes the ability to define and limit the practice of freedom. When freedom is simply defined conceptually and is removed from the political realm, we fail to acknowledge that freedom is subject to struggles over power. Hanson's call for clarifying the link between understandings of freedom and the political contexts in which they operate is undergirded by this battle over power, which Hanson does not mention, but which guides his analysis. It is especially evident, as his nonnormative argument seems to take a subtle tone of support for the critical discussions of freedom offered by engaging deliberations about aesthetic freedom. In this deliberative space, power clearly operates in both the defining and enacting of freedom.

As Hanson makes his case, I appreciate several issues his analysis raises. First, I realized that I and many other scholars writing about civics education often fail to articulate the connection between political systems and freedom. Indeed, many of us are guilty of making the very assumption that Hanson warns us against. Second, he sheds light on the subtle but significant differences in the way that freedom begins as preferences within the private sphere in the tradition of John Stuart Mill and within the public sphere in the deliberative tradition. As Hanson shows, these public/private differences suggest that some civics education practices may not even be suited for the public space of education at all. Third, Hanson's contrasting depictions portray freedom as fixed in some settings and flexible in others. For example, in referencing Mill's dislike for state-run education, we are reminded that within an aesthetic account of freedom, teachers are encouraged to discuss and form freedom with students, while within Mill's account, freedom is set and should not be subject to the tinkering of teachers.

Hanson notes that both Mill and Benjamin Constant do "not fully provide the information necessary to educate for freedom." I found myself wondering, what information or how much information is necessary to educate for freedom? Is there some minimum amount that must be provided by a scholar or a discourse about freedom? Or might it be the task of teachers to fill in the blanks and connect the dots in order to develop a coherent approach to teaching for freedom and democracy?

This moves me into my final concerns with *how*, *where*, and *when* do we guide teachers in clarifying the link that Hanson has helpfully brought to our attention? I want to offer some initial thoughts in this direction. Any effort in this regard, however, must be guided by a realistic assessment of preservice and present teachers and the teacher education programs that serve them. As anecdotally reported by many professors, teacher education majors seem to be especially driven by the

practical. They want to know exactly what they can do in their future classrooms. Some professors convey that their students see talking about democracy as neither helpful nor applicable. It seems that only when issues of democracy are directly tied to specific problems or issues that teachers will definitely and regularly confront in their teaching that they will engage in such areas.¹ In this way, we have to make the connections between discussing political theory and actual classroom practice clear in order for students to appreciate it. Overt discussions of democracy within universities that house teacher education programs are also changing. It was only about a decade ago that nearly five hundred university presidents called for more emphasis on the values and skills of democracy.² But today most teacher education program mission statements no longer reference democracy or citizenship. This situation suggests that teacher education programs are now even less likely to have discussions about democracy and freedom in the first place.

So what can we do? One suggestion comes directly from Hanson. We can use teachers' own struggles with leading controversial discussions to expose their lack of clarity or faulty implications between notions of freedom and political systems. Sometimes, preservice teachers come to their professors to process these struggles and sometimes, practicing teachers seek the guidance of their mentors. A second suggestion is to take a remedial step in coursework. While reading Hanson's essay, I wondered about the extent to which teachers are familiar with or thoroughly understand structures like aggregative and deliberative democracy. We may need to better define these within preservice classes. A third suggestion relates to a way we might clarify those definitions. We might guide teachers in analyzing the notions of freedom and political systems that are invoked in the state social studies standards. This may include looking at how the standards have changed over time and learning about controversies in their origination, such as the battles over the creation of history standards by Charlotte Crabtree and Diane Ravitch beginning in 1987. These conversations could take place in social studies department professional development seminars or in preservice social studies methods courses. Finally, as philosophers of education, we must ask ourselves about our own obligation in shedding light on this murky situation. We must consider how to address the relationship between political theory and philosophy and how we can do so in ways that are relevant and useful for our students as future teachers.

Insofar as these final thoughts point toward a direction for the future, they should indicate my support for the project Hanson has put forward and my call for others to join us in this worthy endeavor.

1. Michael W. Apple, "Is Deliberative Democracy Enough in Teacher Education?" in *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education*, eds. Marilyn Cochran-Smith, Sharon Feiman-Nemser, D. John McIntyre, and Kelly E. Demers (New York: Routledge, 2008).

2. Emily Robertson, "Teacher Education in a Democratic Society," in *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education*, eds. Marilyn Cochran-Smith, Sharon Feiman-Nemser, D. John McIntyre, and Kelly E. Demers (New York: Routledge, 2008).