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NEH Seminar: The Philosophers of Education

On the Nature and Limitations of Knowledge: The Case for Teaching the Philosophy of Education in the International Baccalaureate Theory of Knowledge Class

The Theory of Knowledge (TOK) class within the International Baccalaureate (IB) program plays a unique role. The mission of the class is to develop in students an understanding of the process of knowing rather than explore a specific body of content. The TOK course examines how we know what we claim to know. In doing this, the TOK class is intended to act as a place of connection between the content of subject classes. Epistemology is central to this objective. The study of the nature and grounds of knowledge especially with reference to its limits and validity is infused in the IB subject guides and assessments. Questions about the nature of knowledge or the limitations of knowledge take center stage in the TOK class. This balance illustrates the IB approach to educating the whole student in a balanced manner.

One challenge of this approach is the general nature of the this inquiry can present problems for both students and teachers. Open-ended knowledge questions can lead to vague answers and few actual insights. When asked about TOK, some of my students (in a candid moment) share that it is an class in which one can easily achieve an A by talking a lot. As a matter of fact, in one semester 80% of their grade was comprised of in class discussion. Many students prefer a challenge. One way to introduce more rigor is to tie general questions about knowledge to a more specific inquiry about learning. Essential questions closely related to the ones above such as “What are the objectives of education?” “Who should be educated?” “What practices lead to learning?” “What should we learn and how should we learn it?” might help elevate the level of inquiry and keep the TOK class true to its epistemological mission.

Toward this end, this paper proposes examining the above essential questions through the spectrum of western educational philosophy over the past 300 years. While there are many ways to approach this subject, this paper proposes spotlighting eight people who represent major contributions and movements in education and who have thus

shaped in how we have understood knowledge. These examples bring a balance of philosophers who address theory and those who address application. Recognizing the limitations of time, the information focuses on each philosopher's ideas and the context in which each person lived and worked.

In an effort to keep the focus on the nature and limitations of knowledge and not current developments in the field, this list is crafted to exclude people who are alive and working today. The main goal is for students to finish the unit with insights into how we have come to understanding learning and education in the West over the past 300 years. By the end of the study the goal is for students to not only know these individuals and their ideas, but that they will also be able to place themselves and their educational experience in a larger context.

Theories on Learning

The survey begins with two main educational theorists, John Locke and Jean-Jacque Rousseau. John Locke (1632-1704) was born into a middle-class family in England. For his education he attended a boarding school at age 13. He was unhappy with experience because of its focus on rote memorization of Latin and Greek in the classroom and hazing incidents outside the classroom. He entered Oxford at age 15 and developed an interest in science. He became a medical doctor and developed a practice of making conclusions based on observations. A member of the Enlightenment, Locke came to embrace the ideals of reason, human potential, and progress. He turned a series of letters to a patron on how to raise children into a book entitled *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. Published in 1693, the book became an influential guide.

For Locke the goal of education is to produce adults who are independent and self-governing. In order to do this, one must educate both body and mind. Children are born as blank slates and education should fill them with knowledge. Education should emphasize the development of virtue as central to learning and for Locke religious instruction is important in the development of virtuous people. Another element of Locke's understanding of learning is that children can reason and should be treated with reason.

Locke addressed some of the limitations of education. He identified the differences between the temperament of individual children and encouraged tutors to individualize instruction based on these differences. Locke also recognized the limitations of rewards and punishments. He called on tutors to limit the use of these because it appeals to

emotion. After all, the goal of education was to develop students who acted based on reason, not emotion.

Coming after Locke, Jean Jacque Rousseau (1712-1778) had different ideas about the nature of knowledge. Born in Geneva to a middle-class family, Rousseau's father never attended school. He was a watchmaker. Rousseau learned a great deal from watching his father and other adults work. He also taught himself by reading.

Another significant educational philosopher during the Enlightenment was Jean Jacques Rousseau. In 1762, Rousseau wrote *Emile, or On Education* with the goal of constructing a fundamental philosophy of life and explaining how one might raise a child according to that philosophy. The opening sentence of *Emile* gives a taste of Rousseau's romantic approach. "All things are good as they come out of the hands of their Creator, but everything degenerates in the hands of man." Rousseau's believed in the true nature of humanity and the corrupting nature of society. Education and learning were to be the remedy to this problem. In the words of one scholar: Education was nothing less than a essential part of Rousseau's revolutionary plan to lead mankind from absolutism and authoritarianism toward freedom and independence.

Locke and Rousseau shared a number of ideas about learning. Both believed in the importance of educating both body and mind. Both also directed their thinking toward the education of the children of the elite and believed the best way to teach these children was with a tutor. Both also rejected rote memorization as part of learning. However, the there were real differences as well. Rousseau's belief in the essential goodness of humanity sets him apart from Locke. Where Locke might believe that education is designed to help us identify our bad qualities and change them, Rousseau encourage us to be ourselves and be true to our essence. Where Locke would view the child as an onion, with education helping the child develop layer upon more perfect layer; Rousseau would view the child as an artichoke, a being with an already existing heart. The goal of education was to peel back the bracts to reveal the heart. Rousseau encouraged students to explore on their own and make mistakes in the process of learning. For Rousseau the goal of learning is self discovery. A person who understands themselves is more likely to make society better. These sentiments are may be best illustrated in the words of Anton Checkov when he writes "Man will become better when you show him what he is like."

Another contribution of Rousseau is the invention of the concept of childhood. Contrary to the popular belief at the time, Rousseau understood that children are not just little humans. That children have appropriate development stages. Up until the age of 12,

children are guided by their emotions and impulses. During this time, learning should be focused on a series of well-developed, hands-on learning problems. Between 12 and 15, children begin to develop their reasoning skills. This is the time to teach them to read and introduce a limited number of books. Starting at age 16, child becomes an adult. This is the period tutors should introduce abstract concepts to students like religious belief.

Educating the Masses

The philosophies of Locke and Rousseau are constructed on the idea of education on a small scale. Children of the elite are taught by a tutor. One of the first voices to address a systematic approach to educating on a larger scale is Thomas Jefferson. Like other Enlightenment philosophers, Jefferson (1743-1826) viewed education as the key to creating a stable, republican society with a satisfied citizenry. He envisioned a system of learning open to a larger number of children. This system would provide free access to basic education for all free boys and girls, and would allow those who are skilled at learning to rise higher and receive a more advanced education.

In 1785, Thomas Jefferson outlined his ideas for public education in his book *Notes on the State of Virginia*. It called for the creation of a three-tiered, tax-funded public school system in Virginia. Primary schools would be free and open to all free children ages 6 to 8. Schooling would run over three years and instruct students on reading, writing, math, geography, and history. At the end of each year, one boy from each school would be picked to advance to the next stage, a free intermediate school. Other students could continue their education if their parents paid for it. This school would be designed for children ages 9 to 16. The curriculum would be focused on teaching Greek and Latin, math, science, geography and skills like navigation. The capstone of this system was the university, designed for students ages 17 to 19 whose parents were willing to pay. The focus of learning here was to be on a sciences. Legislation called *A Bill for More General Diffusion of Knowledge* and based on this framework was introduced in 1817. It was not passed by the Virginia legislature.

Undeterred, Thomas Jefferson turned his thinking to the establishment of a university. The University of Virginia was established in 1819 and opened to students in 1825. It embodied many of the principles that Jefferson wanted to include in his system of public education. A central element to Jefferson university was that it was to be non-religious institution. This was different from most universities of the period. The center of the academic village on the campus was a library not a chapel. Jefferson designed the

instruction for the university to teach about religion as a way of building virtue but not to promote religion. This further advanced his notion of the separation of church of state.

While Thomas Jefferson's plans for public education met with limited success, Massachusetts politician and reformer Horace Mann's (1796-1859) had a different outcome. No one did more to establish the idea of free, universal, nonsectarian education in the United States than Mann. For this reason he is often referred to as the father of public education.

Faced with the many of the social and economic challenges of an industrializing and urbanizing New England in the 19th century, Mann looked to transform the existing patchwork of local schools into a system of common schools. He believed these schools could not only better educate students but also close the gaps between the social classes, eliminate poverty, and equalize the condition of man. It was an idealistic goal. He sought to develop schools where education was used to teach the methods of a free society. Students would read the Constitution and learn how government worked. He also believed discipline and building character is just as important as reading and writing. Like Jefferson he believed that schools should not be associated with the church, but he also advocated reading the Bible as a tool to teach virtue. Like Locke and Rousseau, Mann thought of children as raw material, embryos of talent who could be shaped into ideal citizens. Like others he believed physical education and teaching sanitary practices were important in education as well. Mann placed at the center of his common schools well-trained and professional teaching corp that acted as intellectual models and moral guides for their young students. He helped establish a series of normal college for the training of teachers. In the latter part of the 19th century, many states copied the Mann's Massachusetts model. The idea of public schools as the primary tool for education and acculturation became established across much of the United States.

Approaches to Mass Education

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw dramatic social and economic changes in the United States. Continued industrialization and urbanization, new technologies requiring new competencies, and a waves of immigrants from different parts of the world presented new challenges to Mann's common school system. In return, a new push for education reform gained steam. Locally, many education agency address this challenge by opening or dramatically expanding access to high schools. The new field of psychology placed a new focus on the place and development of the child.

John Dewey (1859-1952) and his ideas about democratic education became a leading voice in education during this time. Dewey and Mann shared some of the same ideas about the need for individualization of instruction and schools as a place to impact society. However where Mann placed the focus for education on the teacher, Dewey put it squarely on the student. Child-centered learning became the watchword for Dewey and his growing number of followers. Additionally, Dewey believed the goal of education was not the acquisition of a pre-determined skill or content area. Progressive education sought to help a student realize their potential and abilities by developing critical thinking and problem solving skills. Supporters noted that in a fast changing world these skills would be put to use for the greater good of the community in ways that could not be imagined at the time of the student's schooling. Under this pedagogy, teachers were to guide students by presenting content in a way that related to prior experiences. Rote learning and authoritarian teachers were replaced by meaningful activities. An emphasis was placed on the social aspects of learning by participating in classroom democracy. According to Dewey, knowledge is a social condition and it is important for the teacher to empower and motivate the student in the process of discovery.

By the 1930s, a chorus of critics of Progressive education began to grow. Some felt Dewey's approach watered down educational standards or did not provide a basic foundation in key areas like English, history, math, and science. Others criticized it for its ethical relativism or a lack of fundamentals. In 1959, President Eisenhower wrote a letter published in *Life* magazine blaming John Dewey and his followers for the supposed educational deficits of students in the United States. A race for the hearts and minds of the public and policymakers about public education was on.

Many of those opposing Progressive education began to coalesce around the ideas of Columbia University professor Arthur Bestor (1908-1994) and the ideas in his book *Educational Wastelands* (1953). Bestor stated that intellectual training was the ultimate goal of education. Declining standards and the influence of Progressives at schools of education lowered the aims of American public schools. Bestor sought to create public schools in which a large majority of students were preparing for a college education. Only a liberal arts course of studies will properly prepare high school students for college. Education based on the "felt needs" of students became viewed as anti-intellectual.

Benefits of studying the philosophers of education

What is the goal of education? How do we learn? What do we teach? These some of the questions found in a TOK classroom. Within the context of a survey of the philosophies of education, TOK students can now use the ideas of Locke, Rousseau, Jefferson, Mann, Dewey, and Bestor to address these questions within a framework. Hopefully, the product of that inquiry will be a deeper, more specific, more substantive response. A more developed reflection can also provide more opportunities for students to apply the areas of knowledge and the ways of knowing to knowledge questions.

Included among the goals of the TOK class is reflection and self-discovery. Getting students to ask and answer questions provides an opportunity for much inquiry and discernment. A survey of the philosophies of education would spur questions such as What are the beliefs you hold about knowledge? What do you think about the values and limitations of knowledge as we have explored them. What ideas most resonate or challenge you? How have you witnessed these philosophies in action in your learning experience? How has this impacted your understanding of what constitutes knowledge and how it is constructed? How do people really know if they have the knowledge they have? Examining knowledge beliefs can motivate and deepen student learning.

Conversely, if students are unaware of the different approaches to nature and limitations of knowledge advocated by philosophers of education over the course of time, they are more likely to approach learning in a dualistic fashion. Some parts and approaches to learning will be favored over other parts. With a deeper understanding of the history of different ideas about learning, students are more likely to understand and internalize different approaches and thus become a more well-rounded learner. Understanding the philosophies of education could strengthen the focus on the ideal of encouraging students as lifelong learners.