

AUTONOMY IN STUDENT THINKING

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Manasa Sovaki's article, 'Science Education and Society' (*Directions*, 1980, No. 5) discusses the difficulty in obtaining pupil participation from some Pacific Islanders. 'I. Futa Hela's 'Education Crisis in the South Pacific' (in the same issue of *Directions*) indicates that educators are 'teaming up with big business, investors and other social groups with vested interests' to convert 'the whole populace' to the mistaken belief that to serve the 'community' they must acquire certain practical skills. People, he thinks (and I agree), are being led to the fallacious belief in a 'unity of interests', when a more critical and informed understanding of society would make it clear that there are only 'specific interests of particular groups'. All societies are pluralist.

These two articles illustrate the need for more thinking, as opposed to verbal repetition and skill learning, in the South Pacific. This need exists in all countries, and while many educators are uncertain about it, it is widely recognised. This article offers suggestions from my own (Australian) experience. I have been teaching since 1940.

Ellen Wilkinson, when she was Minister for Education in Westminster after World War II, visited Germany and recommended the development, in schools, of independent thought.

'I couldn't agree more, Miss Wilkinson,' said an inspector. 'And now, can you give me some directives for independent thought.'

Our schools, colleges and universities try to encourage autonomy in their students, but there is some confusion about how this can be achieved. People sometimes maintain that there is a conflict between teaching and education, between instruction and independent thinking, between organised learning and freedom. It would be very strange if this were so. The most neglected children would become the best thinkers, and this is obviously not what actually happens. One cannot judge, decide, test, and discover without content, and content must be encountered, at least for some of the time, in a mediated way. Human beings become inquirers through affective interaction with human 'significant others'. Feral children, so far as we know, do not develop their thinking in a human way at all.

Permissiveness does not produce skilled thinkers, nor do exhortations to 'think for yourself'. Rejection and protest are common in young people, but are

seldom independent. Students who tell us that the course is 'irrelevant' and the government 'repressive' may simply be expressing a group dislike for their studies and other conditions. Such complaints are often echoed by people unable to give any coherent account of what they do want. Imitative protest may be justified, useful, effective ... but it is not independent thinking.

To think independently one must understand an issue or problem, grasp something of the processes operating on both sides of a controversy, make informed judgments and perhaps formulate policies. In many cases the independent thinker will not come down unconditionally on one side of a dispute, because he is able to see its complications, which elude the imitative propagandist. The thinker does not substitute abuse for comprehension.

Teachers, at all levels, often feel that their students cannot usefully form judgments, because they do not know enough. How, they ask, can young people make any but foolish judgments in politics, for instance? They know little or nothing of law, sociology, history, economics, and other studies bearing on such decision-making. How can they discover anything new in science? Or express anything other than immature likes and dislikes about literature, art and music? This is, of course, true, in that there are problems which require much preliminary study, and some problems which nobody can solve. If, however, people are to become thinkers they need to cope with problems which are within their range. Part of the process of education is becoming aware of one's limitations. It was in a North Oxford bus that I heard a six-year-old proclaim, 'That is one of the things that nobody knows', a comment indicating that he was already beyond the stage of believing that somewhere there is an infallible authority on every topic.

Teachers are liable at each stage to extend the estimate of the age at which the requisite maturity and information can be expected. In doing so they fail to build up the confidence of their pupils in their own powers, and establish habits of intellectual dependence in areas where this is not necessary, and where the dependence impedes the students' development. 'Independent thinking' can occur in quite young children when confronted with problems within their comprehension. An example is that of a blind boy at an Armidale infants' school. He ran into a table inadvertently moved by a teacher who had placed a Christmas tree on it. After saying, 'Bloody hell! Who moved that?' Justin commented: 'I don't suppose anyone's told Michael either. I must go and find him straight away or he'll run into it too', and went off unbidden on this errand to the other blind pupil. He had independently thought of the other child's danger and of the appropriate action. Justin is a confident boy who has had sensible support in meeting his formidable problems.

If they are to trust themselves to think as distinct from repeating the thinking of others, children need adult interaction of a special kind. In particular, they need interaction with thinking adults who respect the children's thinking powers. It is not a matter of giving way, of letting them become little tyrants, but of working, where possible, with them, in such a way as to foster responsible judging and deciding. Decisions are 'responsible' when the people making them take their consequences. Rousseau tried to incorporate responsibility into his system in *Emile*, recommending that if Emile broke his window it should remain unattended, but it is rarely the case that children are the sole sufferers from broken windows, and in any case the consequences to Emile could have been out of proportion to his fault. Rousseau, however, was on the right track, even if his example is inappropriate.

Children who are frequently ignored, ridiculed, hit, or in other ways 'punished' for expressing their beliefs learn to avoid deciding, suggesting or acting on their own initiative, or at any rate, they avoid doing so when adults will observe them. Unfortunately, many adults delight in humiliating small children, often for the entertainment of other adults. Others trivialize children's suggestions by treating them as 'cute'. A child's thinking is supported by its being taken seriously, even when, as is often the case, it is inappropriate to act on it. It is supported, also, by the knowledge that adults, also, have to seek answers to problems. A simple example is that of the teacher who lets the pupils know that he must consult the dictionary or other expert source in occasional difficulties.

Many tertiary students lack confidence in thinking as a result of secondary school efforts to organise them through examinations. Many teachers do this in good faith, believing that they are helping their pupils in a competitive world. This policy is often counter-productive. Thinking is a major work skill in almost any employment, and in obtaining employment.

When I first conducted philosophy classes for two-year teacher trainees, one girl told me at the end of her course that what she had gained from our work was the realisation that 'ordinary people like me can say things that are worth considering'. In our discussions I made a rule that it was acceptable to answer another student by disagreeing with content, but not acceptable to insult the speaker. 'That's ridiculous', was banned. 'I think you're wrong because...' was allowed.

Another principle I followed was that I put to students opinions which I sincerely held. This ensured that I confronted them with a position as coherent as I could make it. They were not expected to accept my opinions. In avoiding contrived arguments I put them in a position to quote me against myself if I had, or appeared to have been, inconsistent. If I wanted them to consider an

assertion which I did not support I would put it as: 'Some people say...', 'How would you answer this...?'

I found that, once our classes were under way, I could conduct discussions largely on the basis of chairmanship, rather than of entering the arena myself. This required, of course, the posing of the problem in some way. We might, for instance, read the **Protagoras**, raising the question, 'Can virtue be taught?' When students understand that a practical problem is involved ('Can parents, teachers, churches, prisons...form the character, behaviour, life style...of those in their care?') there is usually no shortage of discussion. Some students are themselves parents. All have had experience and observation of attempts, successful or not, to bring up children in ways their elders approve.

'What the book says' in philosophy, education, sociology ... becomes more significant when related to personal observation, and to other reading. In connection with the **Protagoras**, I have used Max Williams' **Dingo: My Life on the Run**, an autobiographical book by a habitual criminal, first in trouble with the police at the age of five, who eventually saw the error of his ways and rehabilitated himself by writing for publication. At Stonnington, Melbourne I used current articles in the **Age** with case studies from Pentridge. I referred also to Gosse's **Father and Son**, the Penguin edition of which I had bought on my way from Armidale. Some lecturers discourage anecdotal contributions by students (and, presumably, by themselves) on the ground that academic issues are general or abstract, and that 'isolated examples do not prove anything'. As I hold that all knowledge, philosophy included, is empirical, I see no way in which generalisations can be arrived at except through the examination of particulars. I uphold what, I think, Hegel meant when he referred to the 'concrete universal', that is, that universals (generalisations) exist only in particulars (examples).

An advantage of the anecdotal approach is that it enables students to realise that the 'exception' to a 'rule' (generalisation) is itself an instance of some other generalisation, and this may be the crucial one in the investigation. Current generalisations about the relation of school success and the 'middle class' can be readily challenged by reference to academically successful people from low income families. This brings out the fact that it is the environment's support for organized learning, and not income level, which is the operative factor. It also brings out the circularity of the argument which ascribes to the low-income achiever a 'middle-class outlook'.★

★1. I have examined many cases where successful learners appear to have come from non-supportive environments, and in each case have found that there was a relative, friend, teacher ... who, as 'significant other', influenced the young person's development. I do not know of cases, in any economic setting, when talent 'just grew'.

It is only by independent thought that students appreciate how their college or university preparation contributes to their teaching, to other paid occupations, or to their family life. They must relate their book work now to 'real life' if they are ever to do so. The relating is done by their own active thinking, by their being co-workers and contributors to the work of the class and of its teacher.