

Dewey and Freire Need Each Other

Education Week's blogs > Learning Deeply

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I have been following with much interest the conversation started by Sarah M. Fine on bridging what she calls the Freire-Dewey divide, followed by Pooja Bakhai's provocative argument that Dewey needs Freire but not vice-versa.

Having a strong connection to Freire and his work, my heart warmed to Pooja's incisive argument. But then it made me pause. Claiming that Freire does not need Dewey re-establishes the Freire silo and keeps two powerful fields ignoring or fighting each other while a greater enemy continues unabated: the default culture of schooling.

I agree with Pooja that critical pedagogy, when fully embraced and enacted, is a form of deep learning. But so is Deweyan pedagogy when skillfully put into action. In my view, the question is not whether the ideas of one or the other are more conducive to deep learning. The question is: Why haven't either spread beyond a minimal set of classrooms or schools? Deep learning pops up in a handful of classrooms and schools through the extraordinary efforts of a few extraordinary educators, but the dominant logic of schooling remains unchanged.

Freire and Dewey need each other not because either of their ideas fall short of causing deep learning when fully embraced and enacted, but because both sets of ideas have failed to take hold in the vast majority of schools across entire educational systems. As revolutionary thinker Antonio Gramsci would put it, they have both failed to establish a new hegemony--that is, a set of ideas, beliefs, and practices that are widely shared in a social group, and become the new taken-for-granted. They have fallen short of subverting and redefining the institutional culture and power relationships of schooling, which gets as much in the way of learning (a core concern for Dewey) as in the way of social justice (a core concern for Freire).

Before asking Freire and Dewey to come together and hold hands, let me briefly outline what I see as some key distinctive features of each thinker's pedagogies, followed by a quick overview of the current state of the world and what I see as an emerging convergence between both.

Critical pedagogy has placed most of its emphasis on examining and dismantling some of the most blatant and evident forms of oppression. As such its methodology has been best suited to the pursuit of social justice and robust democracy. The

branch of Dewey that focuses on constructivist theories of learning have been more concerned with themes and questions that have been pursued through traditional academic disciplines--mathematics, science, history, etc. In this sense, constructivist methodologies have been best suited to the development of disciplined academic thinking and problem solving, which in turn has been historically valued as an entry ticket to higher education and employment.

We are living in a world where both the pursuit of social justice and the ability to understand and solve complex problems are equally urgent. No doubt young people have to understand and dismantle deeply embedded forms of oppression such as racism, sexism, misogyny, xenophobia, and the like. But they also have to be prepared to tackle massive and complex problems such as those posed by the predicted disappearance of most jobs in the next few decades and the rise of fundamentalism and violence, not to mention climate change and the prospects of the extinction of life on the planet. And I don't think we can afford to choose one set of problems over the other.

In my view, the emerging concept of deep learning has the potential to bridge together critical pedagogy and constructivist pedagogies. This is so because the skillsets and mindsets required for robust democracies are starting to converge with those required for problem solving and employability. Both vibrant democracies and productive economies now require people who can think critically, find creative solutions, collaborate and communicate effectively, act with compassion and solidarity, and self-regulate - what some have called the 21st century skills or deep learning competencies.

Let me propose three theses that may help us get Freire and Dewey to listen to and learn from each other while walking alongside each other towards the future. These theses are presented and discussed in more detail in an upcoming book chapter I prepared for an anthology on educational change to be published this fall.

Deep learning is a practice of freedom. Whatever its content (be it understanding a mathematical principle, making sense of a poem, or examining what gets in the way of fairness in a school), deep learning is, at its core, a liberating act. It involves getting immersed in and making sense of questions that matter to us, connecting our experiences and what we already know to make meaning of or solve new puzzles, transforming ourselves and, in the best examples, changing the world in the process.

The instructional is political. The instructional core--the relationship between a learner and a teacher in the presence of knowledge--is not only the basic structure within which learning happens (or not). It is also a basic unit of power relationships, where dominant forms of hierarchical separation and control can be either reproduced or subverted. If deep learning is a practice of freedom, effective pedagogy runs inherently against the grain of the conventional culture of schooling. Rather than perpetuating vertical relationships of power and control (knowledge

over teachers, teachers over students), pedagogies for deep learning establish more horizontal relationships where both parts (teachers and students, students and knowledge) influence each other through dialogue. Individual and collective freedom is not to be pursued solely through the critical examination of and action over our most evident oppressive conditions, but also in the more subtle, everyday interactions between adults and young people in the presence of knowledge.

Schools and context should be changed in equal measure. Changing schools and changing the context that affects students learning opportunities outside of schools have been treated as two dichotomous options in a zero-sum game--investing in one results in divestment in the other. But there is no reason why the problem has to be framed in this way, especially if pedagogies for deep learning can make their way into schools. Involving communities and cities in educating children and youth, as well as creating opportunities for students to identify local challenges that affect their everyday lives, identify their key causes and design and try out solutions, are some of the ways in which this could be accomplished.

The pedagogies inspired by both Dewey and Freire, when fully embraced and acted upon, are powerful vehicles for deep learning. There might be important differences in what each of these influential thinkers consider as the key problems to solve. But I believe there is a larger and more important fight to fight than Freire vs. Dewey. It is deep learning vs. schooling as we have known it. And we have a much better chance of winning if Freire and Dewey join forces.