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| Author(s) | Michael Tan |
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Learning during interesting times: An opportunity for collective reflection?

Readers of this journal should no doubt have had enough of the recurrent memes circulating about the current year. 2020 has been an unusually long year; with the first half giving us as many historically significant events as other whole years. Certainly, CoVID-19 dominates the headlines, along with the anti-intellectual reaction of authoritarian populist governments; in the US and countries all over the world with colonial histories, people are contemplating histories, discrimination, and ethical ways forward.

As researchers of education generally speaking, and learning in particular, we have a responsibility to think about our contribution, or even lack thereof, to the particular historical moments that we find ourselves in. As a journal that focuses on learning, it might be useful from time to time to remind ourselves that the term as used in academic and political circles can obscure important questions of content, purpose, and relationships (Biesta, 2005, 2013): What is it that ought to be learnt? For what reasons are these ideas to be learnt? What is to be the ideal relationship between learners, instructors, and the material that is to be learnt?

Education researchers often study contexts of formal schooling, for which the question of curriculum is generally not up for contention—state ministries or departments of education determine what is to be taught, and it is up to researchers to develop methods to best communicate these curricula to students. To be sure, education researchers are also involved in curriculum critique and reform, but as Burbules (2020) reminds us, the most common means by which researchers communicate our findings is through the medium of the academic journal article, and this can pose problems. Our published work is: (i) not likely to be read; and (ii) even if read, not understood; and (iii) even if understood, not agreed with; and (iv) even if agreed with, plays no consequential role in practical and political contexts as practitioners base their considerations on more holistic thinking than the reductionistic findings that we peddle.

These questions, in my opinion, invite us to think more deeply about the means and ends of learning: what is it, exactly, do we expect our work to accomplish in the rough and tumble of 'the real world'? Given the complexities of most practical contexts of learning, how well can we expect the theories that we develop to work when contexts shift? What might we use to judge that our theories are 'working'? How might we shift the way academic journals function in order that we might actually have practical consequences in the world?

This is, of course, not to start a methodological debate; we have had these in the past, and have learnt a lot. With contemporary approaches such as Design Based Implementation Research, we have come closer to a hybrid position between the fundamental tension in deciding whether education is better described as an art or a science. Yet, even then, the design centric, engineering biased mode of thinking can run the risk of being excessively reductionistic. Yes, we do want our students to learn *something*. But at which point will we cross a line where we stop thinking of students as humans who have their own desires and who can refuse our instruction, and where they become merely receptacles for 'knowledge' that we deem desirable for them? What is the ambition for our research? To develop idealised methods for instruction so that we may guarantee or somehow ensure that

particular kinds of learning occurs? Is it not rather telling that we often minimise the identity of the 'learner', preferring to report about students in the aggregate, or that in general, we often attempt to erase their individuality? We seek the 'average' student, and we tend to be suspicious of small sample sizes.

If we would like our research to have some 'real world impact' as we are often urged to demonstrate by university administrators and grant funders; if we would like to prepare our students for futures forever unforeseeable, we might want to think about how our approaches might be contributing to the current state of affairs, and if we can do something about changing it. To complicate matters, I do not believe that directly addressing issues actually helps matters: it seems to me that if we educate for the future by reference to events that have happened in the past, we will perpetually be fighting last year's battles, attempting to understand new events through the lens of the old. This is not to say that there should not be intergenerational projects, but we need skills in understanding new occurrences, and not only to correctly comprehend what is happening, but also a better approach to creatively prepare solutions for open futures.

Consider the CoVID crisis: yes, we have certainly have had similar outbreaks before; but multiple sociocultural factors make this a unique moment. We simply cannot crack open the manual from previous outbreaks and assume this will be like the last. Yes, we have a guide as to what we should prepare for, but the major challenge of living will always be that of choosing appropriately what our course of action should be. Yes, we understand epidemiological rules, the structure and genetic sequence of viruses, human psychology and organisational culture. But should we reopen schools? Wear masks? 'Keep calm and carry on'? We seek control, predictability, and the ability to standardise, but surely there are contexts in which such goals are not completely desirable? At risk of repeating myself, the education of human beings certainly seems to me an inappropriate context for applying such industrialised logic.

To give this idea a name, we need a more *humanistic* vision of learning. We need to educate students for creativity, judgment, and wisdom, and we need better ways of documenting the kinds of growth that happens in students when they become better at understanding the nuances necessary to take action in our complex world. How might we be better able to nurture our young to make better decisions in their lives? Given the multitude of ways in which 'better' can be construed, should we not similarly rethink what good learning looks like? In what ways do our goals for learning coincide with visions for living that expands the horizons of the possible? How might we stop our addiction to thinking about learning because 'the economy' demands it?

I acknowledge that for many readers of this journal, such considerations may not be germane—after all, disciplinary specialisation has allowed the development of a particular depth of knowledge. Specialisation also means we can afford to engage in reductionist practices such as dividing the holistic phenomena of education into the discrete disciplines of policy, curriculum, pedagogy, and the various sub-disciplines. What we may gain in depth, we may lose in interconnectivity and interaction.

And so, this editorial is written, not in any way related to the articles that have been contributed, but as a means to respond to the events of our times. It is not normal that hundreds of thousands of people are infected with a potentially deadly disease. It is not

normal that never-before-recorded weather signals are occurring all over the world. It is not normal that all these things are happening, and we have powerful forces who want nothing more than to rush headlong into the precipice. All over, people continue to ask what the new normal should be. Perhaps it should also be a time for our journal (and others in the field of learning) to think more deeply about what Learning ought to be. Can we develop better ways of bringing about humanistic learning? Can we have more holistic research approaches rather than the technocratic and reductionist? Can we better document the diverse and complex ways that we may continue to have hope?

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