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David R. Hiley

University of New Hampshire, david.hiley@unh.edu

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What is Democratic Education?*

DAVID R. HILEY

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

Why does education matter in a democratic society and in particular, why does higher education matter? What should a democratic education be like, and who should decide how future citizens will be educated?

These questions suggest that education is a *political* matter as much as it is about teaching and curriculum. Plato understood this when he placed education at the center of his construction of the ideal Republic. Thomas Jefferson also understood this from the earliest days of the democratic revolution in America.

In 1779, Jefferson submitted a bill to the Virginia legislature that, had it passed, would have provided a system of education from primary school through university at public expense. His “Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge” included a selection system through which young men (*yes, only young men*) of ability could rise through the system to university education regardless of family background and means.¹ He offered three interconnected rationales. First, ignorance enslaved the mind, and only education could liberate people from the powers of tyrants and the superstitions of priests. Second, publicly supported education would break down the artificial, inherited aristocracy that was characteristic of Europe and would replace it with an egalitarian society. Finally, Jefferson also well knew the inherent risks when the people rule. The rule of the people can so easily degenerate into the tyranny of the many. It has been said that in a democracy, one depends on the wisdom of strangers. It is, therefore, in our mutual interest to support the education, including higher education, of citizens in a democracy, since our fate depends on them. This was a new and radical idea, because it rested on a new and radical conception of citizenship.

How should we educate citizens for democracy? How we answer this question depends, in part, on what we think about democracy. Too often we identify democracy with such institutions as voting, representative

government, the rule of law, constitutional protections of individual rights, and so forth. As important as these are, democracy is more than this. John Dewey observed that “a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” in which we understand our own actions and interests in relation to shared concerns of other citizens.² At its core, a democratic form of life is grounded in respect for individuals and our recognition of an obligation to come together with other individuals to make decisions about our common good.

This is more difficult than it sounds in a pluralist society such as ours. We often bring very different backgrounds and moral and religious perspectives to many of the issues that we must decide as a people. Think, for example, of the war in Iraq, of abortion policy, or of support for embryonic stem cell research. Our disagreement about the best policy is often based on fundamental differences in basic moral and political values—on different views about America’s role in the world, for example, or the right to life vs. right to choice, or when life begins. In a pluralist democracy, can anyone legitimately claim to be in possession of the truth of the matter and declare that opposing views are false? Plato wanted a philosopher king—someone who had ultimate wisdom—to rule. But in a democracy, the people rule (which is why Plato disliked democracy). And in a pluralistic democracy, the people often disagree about fundamental values, yet we still must make decisions that bind us all.

Political philosopher Benjamin Barber once observed that “democracy begins where certainty ends.”³ For him, the political world is necessarily uncertain; a world in which reasonable people can come to very different conclusions, a world in which we must recognize that other citizens have different values and also recognize the fallibility of our own best judgments. How should citizens and future citizens be educated for the challenges of a pluralistic democracy?

*This essay is adapted from chapter 6 of my book, *Doubt and the Demands of Democratic Citizenship*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

To frame this question, let me note a paradox about the condition of democracy in the late 20th and early 21st century. When Amartya Sen, the Nobel Prize-winning economist was asked what he thought the most important development of the 20th century was, he responded, “the emergence of democracy as the preeminently acceptable form of governance.”⁴ His view is widely shared. Yet many students of American culture believe that the idea of democracy at home is deeply strained. In her book, *Democracy on Trial*, for example, Jean Elshtain argues that democracy is in a particularly perilous condition in our country. Elshtain chronicles the ways in which we find ourselves being pulled between an increasingly fragmented society along the lines of race, ethnicity, and gender, on the one hand, and the desire to see ourselves a one people, on the other.

Elshtain begins her account of democracy’s perils with the ironic observation of John Courtney Murray that “disagreement is a very difficult thing to reach.”⁵ She believes that it is the task of a democratic citizen in a pluralist society to be able *to reach disagreement*, and she uses the task of reaching disagreement as a lever for diagnosing the fragile condition of democracy. She believes we need a new social covenant in America. A “new social covenant,” she writes, “is not a dream of unanimity or harmony, but the name given to the hope that we can draw on what we hold in common even as we disagree.”⁶

This, it seems to me, is the best formulation of the challenge we face in thinking about education suited for a pluralistic democracy. How are we to educate citizens and foster institutions that allow us to differ in ways appropriate to a pluralistic society, yet find the common ground necessary for social commitments and collective responsibilities? Sen’s optimism about the spread of democracy and Elshtain’s distress about its fragility in our pluralistic culture provide a powerful framework for situating the cultural context of thinking about democratic education. This paradox offers the possibility to foster an understanding of the hopes and risks of pluralistic democracy and, at a minimum, to give occasions such as this dialogue series to reflect on the connection between democracy and education.

The requirements of a pluralistic society have motivated a good deal of recent rethinking of the curriculum, most obvious in our attempts to deal directly with issues of race, ethnicity, and gender in the curriculum, and in requiring that students be introduced to non-Western cultural perspectives. These are central to the general education requirements for students at UNH

and most universities. But there are other, less obvious areas of the curriculum that also need to be rethought from the needs of democratic society. Think for a moment about why we require science of all students. Why do we believe that it is important for students to study biology, for example? Not why biology students or pre-med students should study biology, but why all students study biology? That it is intrinsically important—true as that might be—is not a sufficiently compelling answer. There are lots of things that are intrinsically interesting and important that we do not require of all students. That knowledge of biology is important in a society faced with significant policy decisions concerning the environment, for example, or stem cell research is compelling. Knowledge of biology or chemistry or an understanding of technology and its social implications is critical for informed citizenship. It is important for democratic participation in policy decisions that are consequential to us as members of society. If we believe that informed citizenship is the reason that knowledge of the sciences is important for all students, that is, if scientific literacy is critical for the deliberative processes of a democratic society, then this is the objective that should guide the science we require of all students. The democratic purposes of scientific understanding must influence how the sciences are taught as part of the general education of all students.

Another less obvious but equally important democratic purpose of the education we expect for all students has to do with communication. Everyone believes that a fundamental goal of the education of all students is effective communication. Some of the most impressive recent work on curriculum and on teaching has focused on the connection between writing and learning. But writing, and communication generally, should not be thought of as merely modes of individual self-expression. Communication, of course, is fundamentally dialogical—we are seeking to be understood by others. But what might this mean in the context of democratic education? What might teaching look like if it fostered the dialogical aspects of communication in a pluralist society?

In his essay, “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” Michael Oakeshott writes that “education, properly speaking, is an initiation into the skill and partnership of... conversation, to recognize the voices, to distinguish the proper occasions of utterance, and in which we acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to conversation.”⁷ “Conversation” is a term of art for Oakeshott. Its contrast concept for Oakeshott is “inquiry.” The goal of inquiry is agreement about the

truth of the matter, and while this is the appropriate mode for many aspects of our life, it is unsuited to some of our most fundamental disagreements. Conversation, by contrast, is a partnership where the goal is less a matter of agreement than of understanding those who might differ. In a pluralistic society, we must recognize that there will sometimes be *reasoned disagreement* about some things—that sincere, intelligent, morally sensitive people can think from or arrive at different and incompatible values. In a pluralistic democracy, thoughtful disagreement should be expected and respected.

But still, in a democracy citizens must decide our collective good even when we disagree. This is why Elshtain thinks a pluralistic democracy requires a new social covenant through which we can reach disagreement about some things yet still seek democratic agreement where we must.

Reaching disagreement is a skill that is in exceedingly short supply. What we increasingly lack as a society is the capacity for a conversation of diverse voices. This is what I believe Elshtain means by a new social covenant. It is what Amy Gutmann, a political philosopher and president of the University of Pennsylvania, describes as the very nature of democratic education. According to Gutmann “the most distinctive feature of a democratic theory of education is that it makes a democratic virtue out of our inevitable disagreement...”⁸ That is, democratic education is not about getting to the truth. It is about the processes that cultivate the democratic dispositions of citizens and the institutions that foster those dispositions in the face of persistent differences. As Alan Keenan has put it, it requires “affirming rather than denying democracy’s constitutive incompleteness, such a mode of democracy would require attitudes of forbearance, self-limitation, and openness to collective self-questioning.”⁸

Here are some of my thoughts about ingredients of a democratic disposition. First—and less obvious than it may appear—it needs to be a disposition *for* democracy, for its aspirations, their incomplete realization, and its fragile nature. Second, it needs to include the capacity for democratic communication. Mutuality and respect for those who disagree are the conditions for the possibility of democratic communication. This is much more than expressing and respecting diversity. It is the willingness to understand those who differ while seeking common ground, given the persistence of differences. Third, it needs to include the capacity to hold strong convictions while recognizing one’s own fallibility and, thus, the fallibility of one’s convictions. The ideologues

have framed too many of our important debates as if our alternatives were true believers or the misguided, between “red-staters” or “blue-staters,” patriots or traitors, and so forth. What this divisive political landscape has produced is a great many people who have become cynical about politics, alienated from governmental institutions, and indifferent about the outcome of our crucial disagreements. It seems to me that the democratic disposition must find its place between the true believers and the cynics, since cynical indifference is as much the enemy of democracy as intolerance.

Finally, a democratic disposition needs to be skeptical—not its cynical version, the version fostered by world-weary editorialists and investigative reporters, nor an indifferent skepticism which doubts equally every opinion. I mean the kind of skepticism exemplified by Socrates who could conceive of himself both as son of Athens, its true citizen, and yet its sharpest critic. We need to commit ourselves to the democratic values at the core of American society while being willing to doubt and criticize presidents and congresses and non-governmental institutions when they put those values at risk. The historian, Daniel Boorstin, observed that “the courage to doubt, on which American pluralism, federalism, and religious liberty are founded, is a special brand of courage, a more selfless brand of courage than the courage of orthodoxy: a brand that has been rarer and more precious in the history of the West than courage of the crusader.”⁹ Democratic education should foster the courage to doubt.

What do you think about my suggestions and how would you subtract or add to this list? Entering into a conversation about what democracy is, about the relationship between education and democracy, and about how we might educate citizens for a pluralist and democratic society is itself an aspect of democratic education, since it recognizes that ultimately WE should decide the answers to these questions. And the answers we decide should be subject to the ongoing questioning by future citizens. This conversation itself might serve to invigorate your education and also to reinvigorate our democracy.

Endnotes

- ¹ A convenient source for this and other key documents about Jefferson's views on education is the appendix of James B. Conant, *Thomas Jefferson and the Development of American Public Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962)
- ² John Dewey, " *Democracy and Education*, New York: The MacMillan Company, 1962, p. 57
- ³ Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.
- ⁴ Amartya Sen, "Democracy as a Universal Value," *Journal of Democracy*, 10, (1999), p. 3.
- ⁵ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial*, New York: Basic Books, 1995, p. xi.
- ⁶ *Democracy on Trial*, p. 31.
- ⁷ Michael Oakeshott, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind," in *Rationalism in Politics*, New York: Basic Books, 1962, p. 199.
- ⁸ Alan Keenan, *Democracy in Question: Democratic Openness in a Time of Political Closure*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 15.
- ⁹ Daniel J. Boorstin, *Hidden History: Exploring our Secret Past*, New York: Vintage Books, 1987, p. 183.