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Anarchy in the Universities: Beyond the Student-Teacher Hierarchy

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Abstract

This paper examines how the central tenets of much of the thinking of key contemporary educational theorists such as Lave, Wenger and Schön found earlier expression in the work of anarchist philosophers such as Bakunin, Proudhon, and Illich. Three principles of an anarchist philosophy of education for the twenty-first century are derived, and an argument developed that learning from the learners requires the collapse of the student-teacher hierarchy.

The 'Problem' with Education

Traditional approaches to teaching have been scrutinised and found wanting, and so too have both the relationships between teaching and learning, and between student and teacher. Educational theory is currently being transformed by the introduction of 'innovative' ideas and techniques such as the social theory of learning (Lave, 1996; Wenger, 1999), communities of practice (Wenger, 2007), collaborative learning and peer assessment (McConnell, 2006), and contextualised learning (Schön, 1987, 2000). Against this background of radical change, is there a necessity to fully embrace the philosophy underpinning contemporary educational theory, or could such reforms to educational methods and techniques be arrived at from an altogether different perspective?

So What is Anarchism?

The etymological root of "*anarchism*" derives from the Greek, "*an-archos*", meaning "*without leaders*". While there are many strands of anarchism, the central concept binding these disparate, non-canonical positions is that of a rejection of the notion of the State (Reichert, 1969, cited in Suissa, 2001), and, more fundamentally, of the power relations upon which it rests. As a broad-ranging political philosophy, anarchism is more than simply a philosophy of education; however, it has always relied heavily on education as a means to achieve its ends. For the purposes herein, anarchism will therefore be defined as a philosophy that rejects the notion of social interaction based on hierarchical or authoritarian power relationships.

Three Principles of an Anarchist Philosophy of Education

Principle One - The social, collaborative model of education

Historically contextualised within the Enlightenment humanist tradition, William Godwin, "the founder of philosophical anarchism" (Philp, 2009, para. 1), evidences a social, collaborative nature to the anarchist conception of education when he describes learners who "are accustomed, in candid and unreserved conversation, to compare their ideas, suggest their doubts, [and] examine their mutual difficulties", and later where he suggests that upon communicating these ideas to others, "their hearers will be instigated to impart their acquisitions to still other hearers, and the circle of instruction will perpetually increase" (Godwin, 1842, Book VI, para. 14).

Closer to the present day, Ivan Illich demonstrates an intuitive understanding of how collaborative learning takes place when he asks "[w]hat kinds of things and people might learners want to be in contact with in order to learn?" (Illich, 1971, p. 78). In his response to this question, parallels can be drawn with both McConnell's description of collaborative learning (McConnell, 2006), and Wenger's observations on communities of practice (Wenger, 2007), when Illich suggests that the learner requires "both information and critical response to its use from somebody else" (Illich, 1971, p. 78).

This emphasis on the social, collaborative nature of learning is a common theme in the writing of many anarchist thinkers, and is also fundamental to the work of other contemporary theorists (e.g. Lave, 1996), forming the first key principle of an anarchist philosophy of education.

Principle Two – The integration of theoretical and practical elements of education

Writing in 1851, Proudhon argued that the class distinction upon which the socio-economic and political *status quo* rested was itself perpetuated by a state-run system of education which split professional activities from practical skills (Proudhon, 1851). To overcome Proudhon's dichotomous division, his contemporary, Bakunin, proposed an *integral* education, which must "develop both physical and mental faculties" (Bakunin, 1980, p. 373), combining theoretical knowledge with practical skills.

Further parallels between the postmodern and anarchist schools of thought can be found where, for example, Schön refers to the "freedom to learn by doing in a setting relatively low in risk" (1987, p. 17), echoing Illich's argument for the need to access educational resources outside the school environment:

Since the last generation the railroad yard has become as inaccessible as the fire station. Yet with a little ingenuity it should not be difficult to provide for safety in such places. To deschool the artifacts of education will require making the artifacts and processes available - and recognising their educational value.

(Illich, 1971, p. 83)

This relationship between theoretical and practical elements of education, also central in the work of Lave and Wenger (Lave & Wenger, 1991), forms the second key principle of our anarchist philosophy of education.

Principle Three – The collapse of the student-teacher hierarchy

Further evidence from Bakunin's work suggests that he saw the traditional student-teacher relationship in education as one of the main obstacles to learning, and the core of an anarchist philosophy is prominent in his description of integral schools, which he suggests should be free from:

... the smallest applications or manifestations of the principle of authority. They will be schools no longer ... in which neither pupils nor masters will be known, where the people will come freely ... [and] ... rich in their own experience, they will teach in their turn many things to the professors who shall bring them knowledge which they lack.

(Bakunin, 1916, Footnote 4)

The need to challenge and reform the power structure inherent in the traditional student-teacher relationship is a recurrent theme in both the work of subsequent anarchist authors, and that of the contemporary educational theorists, as evidenced by Schön when he tells us that "the student cannot be *taught* ... but he can be *coached*" (Schön, 1987, p. 17), indicating a fundamental realignment of the traditional power relationship effected by the collapse of the hierarchy. This theme forms the third key principle of the anarchist philosophy of education.

It is clear, even from this brief comparative analysis of the works of some of the major anarchist thinkers with those of the contemporary educational theorists, that, despite many of the authors writing in radically different historical periods, there is contextual progression from Godwin onwards of ideas which retain remarkable consistency in their core themes, and which find expression in the works of both groups.

This latter principle however, in raising questions of power relations, holds potential for significant discord between the two schools of thought, and while there is agreement on the fundamental nature of this principle, there is considerable disagreement on its substance.

How do anarchist and postmodern perspectives on education differ?

As indicated earlier in this paper, the classical anarchist philosophy of education has its roots in the humanist tradition of the Enlightenment, and was given expression by thinkers such as Bakunin, for whom both individualism and collectivism were valued and respected (Bakunin, 1866). By contrast, much of the work of the contemporary educational theorists emerges within the postmodern school of the late twentieth century. While the two schools of thought would not necessarily appear to have been in strict opposition, their underlying philosophical

differences make them axiomatically divergent, and consequently seemingly irreconcilable conflicting viewpoints can arise.

On a political level, and despite various commentators aligning Lave and Wenger with Marxist theory (e.g. Fox, 1999, Contu & Wilmott, 2003), while the work of contemporary educational theorists such as Wenger, Lave and Schön might be thought of as challenging the *status quo* in its approach to shaping new models of education, analysis of education in relation to political philosophy and any criticism of the prevailing economic thinking appears to be notably absent from their work. In this sense, while the *status quo* regarding the current model of the student-teacher relationship is challenged by anarchist thinkers and contemporary educational theorists alike, Lave and Wenger in particular appear not to place significant emphasis on how the system of education itself is contextualised and embedded within the backdrop of free market economics.

The anarchist thinkers would argue that in choosing to “operate within these basic assumptions regarding the inevitability of the liberal state” (Suissa, 2004, p. 20), the contemporary theorists are either supportive of current models of economics and are therefore complicit in perpetuating the very problems which they seem to seek to address through electing not to challenge these assumptions, or are simply ignorant of their relevance in relation to the problems in education.

As such, despite contemporary theorists identifying problems of marginalisation within education, there appears to be no explicit recognition that the traditional student-teacher relationship could itself be a symptom of a socio-economic system which perpetuates an underlying master-slave dialectic, as might be argued by the anarchist thinkers, and from whose perspective the contemporary educational theorists might be seen to address a *symptom* rather than the *cause* of the observed inequalities.

On the issue of power-relationships within education and marginalisation of learners, Lave also appears to agree with Illich’s claim that the formal system of education “leaves the underachiever to bear the blame for his marginality” (Illich, 1970, p. 109) when she says “theories that reduce learning to [*simply*] individual mental capacity/activity ... blame marginalized people for being marginal.” (1996, p. 149, *my italicised insertion*). What is noteworthy here, is that while Lave appears to agree with Illich that marginalisation is a serious issue in education, Lave is also implicitly attacking the notion of individual learning, evidenced elsewhere by Lave and Wenger’s denial of learning as an internalisation of external knowledge, and their insistence of “learning as increasing participation in communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991 p. 49). This privileging of the group over the individual is an important difference between the anarchist and postmodern conceptions of education.

From the anarchist perspective, ‘an education’ is not a product or a service, and ‘Education’ is not a business. Framing higher education in such terminology encourages students to think more than ever before of their time at university not in terms of the opportunity to learn, but merely as an opportunity to acquire a qualification, making the student journey increasingly hoop-driven, rather than increasingly reflexive. Moreover, the practice of referring to students as consumers (e.g. Mandelson, 2009) rather than as individual learners means that, rather than raising educational standards, the traditional hierarchical relationship between students and teachers is fortified by the adoption of a corporate-consumer relationship mirroring the master-slave dialectic.

Conclusion

In developing an argument for the collapse of the student-teacher hierarchy based on an anarchist philosophy of education rather than a postmodern conception, it becomes apparent that it is possible to arrive at key proposals for reforms in education from axiomatically incompatible starting positions emerging from fundamentally different philosophical paradigms. Given the historico-temporal differential between these, it could be concluded that the evolution of theories of learning is apparently cyclic or helix-like in nature, rather than linear, however an acceptance of this point would seem to imply as a corollary that the

epistemological and ontological beliefs underpinning those theories are less necessary for their expression than might previously have been thought.

As such, the notion of exclusive validity of either position is challenged, and while it must be acknowledged that key fundamental differences will necessarily remain, opportunities for proponents of these positions to re-examine core assumptions, to embrace shared values, and to learn from one another are nevertheless revealed. For the anarchists there is the chance to engage in debate with those who share certain key values, but who analyse power relationships in an altogether different light and who do not ground their arguments in class distinction, while for the contemporary educational theorists there must be a vital rethinking of the place of the individual learner within education, and of the associated implications for user-centred design of personalised e-learning systems.

If we are to move beyond the student-teacher hierarchy, and truly benefit from a situation in which we can learn from the learners, then we as academics must both establish relationships with each of our learners as unique individuals within learning communities, and move beyond the constraints imposed by the commodification of higher education which leads to learners being labelled as consumers, at once challenging the free market corporatisation of our universities and the postmodern notion popularised by Lave and Wenger that learning cannot be an individual accomplishment. Thinking in terms of students as co-producers (McCulloch, 2009), and engaging our undergraduates as collaborative partners in research projects would be a great start (Taylor & Wilding, 2009).

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