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Why Teach?

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Introduction

Recently Stanley Fish came to the University of Colorado at Boulder. He was the guest speaker at our annual “The Best Should Teach” lecture series with a talk entitled “Save the World on Your Own Time”. It was a provocative, intellectual, and theatrical event – classic Fish.

In the talk Fish maintained, among many other claims, that we should rid ourselves of the view of education as transformative. For Stanley Fish the classroom and its teachers should not aspire to something so grand and ill-informed. Teaching is a job. University education ought to be aimed at understanding disciplinary frameworks. It isn’t transformative – socially or politically. As we listened, we found ourselves agreeing and disagreeing with Professor Fish. Here we want to propose that a teacher education can and should be guided by a goal of “transformation”. But the goal we have in mind differs from its current use in teacher education, where future teachers are purportedly prepared for social and political transformation. Frequently social justice is the clarion call and schools of education, along with our k-12 public schools, are the proposed terrain for the battle. We would like to offer a distinctly different understanding of the transformative power of teacher education – one that could go against the grain of the established teacher education orthodoxy but one that is neither apolitical nor doctrinaire. Our proposal might be, we admit, a long shot for our profession.

First, though, we offer an aside about educational traditions. Educational goals and purposes vary and yet most educational thinkers propose that education should change students in purposeful ways. Many claim that schooling and the education contained within should “transform” students. In oversimplified terms we have inherited distinct educational traditions.

Conservatives (e.g. E.D. Hirsch, Paul Hirst and Michael Oakeshott) maintain that a proper education needs to convey to students the knowledge and cognitive frameworks that have guided and engaged others in the past. Knowledge, as either information or disciplinary ways of knowing and understanding, provides maps of the world and past human understandings. Students are changed (transformed?) when they engage these understandings and this information. Students become more fully human when they reflectively participate in the human (i.e. humanist) conversation. Progressives (e.g. John Dewey, Eleanor Duckworth, Deborah Meier, and Ted Sizer) fear that such a conservative education is an undue imposition – it acts so as to mold students in ways that don’t fit and may be unbecoming. Progressives believe that we need to create educational contexts for students so that their search for meaning can be bridged with past searches for meaning (the disciplines or habits of mind), so that the student can find his or her way in this world. As a result the student develops, is changed, perhaps transformed. Radicals (e.g. Paulo Freire, George Counts, and bell hooks) argue that current forms of education reproduce an unjust social order and that both schools and the larger society must be transformed. A qualitatively different social and political order, one structured to serve all people equally is needed and it is the goal of students and teacher alike to alter that political order. More recently others (e.g., Dwayne Huebner and Parker Palmer) have

offered a view of spiritual education as a journey through which we come to know our true selves and our place in this temporal, utterly immanent, as well as another perhaps more transcendent, world. In the spiritual tradition transformation is a process of human growth whereby we come to embrace a faith in ourselves and a greater good.

All of these traditions maintain that student growth – human growth – is at the heart of the educational enterprise. For quite some time we believed each tradition’s conception of growth and transformation was fairly distinct. But lately we have come to see at least two of the variations as overlapping – and pointing in similar directions. Recent work by Martha Nussbaum (1990 and 2001) and Mark Edmundson (2004) seem to borrow from the classical humanist tradition, to shape and give direction to a conception of education as transformative. This view shares features with writers in the spiritual tradition, especially Parker Palmer and Dwayne Huebner. And yet there is a divide between the more secular and the spiritual approaches to transformative education. The secular approach is agnostic; it denies a need for faith in a transcendent being or realm. Like Iris Murdoch, in her Sovereignty of Good (1971), this secular approach attempts to supplant conceptions of God with “the good” or the beautiful. The educational texts of the secular tradition are grounded firmly in human creations and culture. The secular approach acknowledges an inner self to the degree that this self contributes to the dialogue about the life worth living and it posits a faith in that self – this inner voice. But the secular view will have no truck with an inner self that connects with a yearning soul, or faith as an abiding belief that life’s mysteries will tellingly unfold. In what follows we elaborate a humanist, secular approach to transformative education and transformative teacher education – one grounded in a particular

understanding of the “liberal arts tradition”. We will leave an exploration of the spiritual aspects of transformative teacher education for another time.

Transformation – The Humanities and Teacher Education

Sometimes we wonder about the value of a liberal arts education. Today’s liberal arts colleges are way too costly, much too diffuse in purpose, and not quite concrete enough in their preparation for the future. On the other hand, in a liberal arts setting students come to be known by professors and one another in ways that get beneath the surface. Students are heard, they are engaged in conversations, and they matter. We imagine the conversations deal in some way with the disciplines studied and the students’ burning questions. As Michael Oakeshott (1989) maintains, a proper education is, at its heart, a conversation with others about things that have mattered for ages. A proper education is taking part in the ongoing and historical human conversation. And these conversations, when focused on distinct disciplinary ways of knowing – allow the learner to structure his or her experience of the world, ourselves and others in distinctly different ways. At least it was partially that way when two of us went to liberal arts institutions some time ago. But we fear that such hopes and vague intimations don’t quite measure up to the yearly bills. What is the value in a liberal arts education? Or, as Mark Edmundson poses the question: Why read? (2004).

We read, according to Edmundson, so as to discover ourselves, to learn the language of ourselves and others, to come to know aspects of our selves and the world previously unrecognized. Each one of us is unique and yet, at the same time, we experience common human refrains and themes. We learn these individual and shared languages so that we might get a glimpse of who we are and what we might become. In

Why Read?, Edmundson outlines the central educational elements that encourage this discovery. The goal, according to Edmundson, is human transformation. The basic element is an education that challenges students to consider their central or ultimate values by posing critical questions about what they value and how they ought to live. It does so in a way that fuses thinking and feeling; posits the presence of and faith in an inner self; and points that self on a path to discovering truths that can guide this process of creating a life.

Challenging Beliefs and Values

Edmundson bemoans today's liberal arts' culture and strategies. At best, he maintains, we entertain students, offering them engaging accounts of the life of the mind. Students, Edmundson decries, are caught within a consumerist culture that values a "distanced and cool" attitude above all else. Students come to the humanities in higher education wanting to be entertained, expecting the likes of a Leno or Letterman as they walk into the university's classrooms and lecture halls. And the best of the humanities professoriate more or less oblige. Students enter the university classroom doors wanting some intellectual-light but, in actuality, need provisional answers to some rather heavy questions like: How should I live my life? They have not learned that an education ought to engage the core of one's being, one's values, one's hopes and life goals. For students, for many of us, education is information that has utility value; it is knowledge that helps us vocationally not ontologically. For these students and teachers education provides clothing for our future vocational roles; it doesn't illuminate our searching souls.

In contrast a transformative education guides us along our central life questions: How should I live my life? What are my purposes? What is work that matters? How do I

picture God? Why should I go to school? Should I marry? Whom should I marry? Should I have a family? What sort of parent do I want to be? It is risky and at times difficult and messy stuff. But these questions begin to get at students' core values, or what Edmundson (following Richard Rorty) calls individuals' "Final Narratives". Final narratives are the stories we tell ourselves when things that really matter are questioned. For prospective educators such final narratives arise in response to such questions as: Why do schools produce such unequal results and what is my role in it – as student, teacher or parent? Students' responses to these questions begin to unveil their values, as well as their view of themselves, the larger social world, and their possible role in it. When students respond that parents and schools pass along culturally variable skills to children and students, or indicate that our class society's schools reproduce existing inequalities, or that such inequalities belie a natural order – these sorts of answers begin to unveil students' understandings. A transformative education offers alternative narratives that challenge students' received views and enlarges or redirects their circle of meaning. It does so in a manner that engages feeling and intellect; does not presuppose a particular answer; is frequently most powerful when it comes at a time when one is not sure of one's way, and relies, in some way, on an inner eye, an inner self.

Mind and Heart

Edmundson writes:

Despite the rhetoric of subversion that surrounds it, current humanities education does not teach subversive skepticism . . .; rather, it teaches the dissociation of intellect from feeling – something that can be a prelude to personal and collective anomie. True education, as Fredrich Schiller rightly saw it, ought to fuse mind

and heart. Current education in the liberal arts does precisely the opposite. At the end of this road lies a human type bitterly and memorably described by Weber:

“Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.” (p.45)

By posing significant questions about students’ final narratives, and offering substantial works that shed light on alternatives to those narratives, thus enlarging students’ circles of understanding, a transformative education walks into messy territory.

Edmundson relates that a humanistic, transformative education invites the students to empathize with a reading, a character, a point of view. Students are asked to imagine what it looks and feels like to be a character or hold a particular perspective. In doing so, the classroom can become disordered and complicated – neither pristine nor analytically precise. He writes –

. . . the process of human growth -- when it entails growth of the heart as well as of the mind – is never particularly clean or abstract. To grow it is necessary that all of our human qualities come into play, and if some of those qualities are not pretty, then so be it. But to keep them to the side so as to preserve our professional dignity – that is too much of a sacrifice. (Men and women die every day, perish in the inner life . . . for lack of what we have to offer.) (p.67)

Developing the inner life and facilitating human growth require that we fuse mind and heart, and a transformative education recognizes this.

How does this occur? Edmundson claims that we offer our students history, philosophy, poetry, as well as novels and their characters to invite students to imagine and empathize with our selves and other selves (see also Nussbaum). In a course one of

us teaches, I (Dan) use Edmundson's autobiography – Teacher. (2002) – which focuses on his high school life on the football field, his father, and the teacher who made a significant difference. When I first read this memoir I struggled through what seemed at the time to be an unduly long and drawn out section recollecting his life as a visually and physically challenged linebacker. When I first assigned the text many of my students slogged through the account of his struggling football achievements. But over time I have come to see this portion of his text and life as depicting a particular kind of living – the Homeric-heroic struggle of bodily pain and athletic achievement. Edmundson captures why my oldest son took up lacrosse and put up with bruises and welts and why my youngest son just won't give up on his pursuit of being the best soccer goalie around. For some, excellence in physical prowess and achievement is a marker of a life that is quite valued and worth living. Many of my practicing and newly arrived secondary teachers tend to scoff at the brutish and violent elements of the football playing field. Their feelings tend to be quite strong – grounded as they are in their own past, and not so distant, high school adolescent lives. They recall the high school smells, the characters in their school, their hurts, feelings, and varied student lives. For many of them football and much of high school athletics are seen as a distraction – not a pursuit worth valuing.

Edmundson's text (2002), his rendering of his high school football existence, challenges so many of those received beliefs and assumptions. It points to a gangly Edmundson self and self-worth entangled on a field full of human sweat, mud, and machismo hype. It points to the athletic achievement that can be had from pushing one's physical edges and captures the camaraderie and emotions attached to being part of a team. In class I have had former athletes, men and women, tell others just what that life

of physical achievement meant to them. They frequently tell tales filled with heart, grit, attitude, and courage. A heroic image lurks underneath. And I have had teachers return back to tell me that they see their athletes differently. Of course some of the teachers in this class are not changed – the text or the experience simply wasn't powerful for them. For those there may be something else we read that will provide the stimulus for self examination and possible transformation.

No single, right direction:

So many teachers believe they know where students ought to head – the values they should hold, the kinds of people they should become. Most of us want our students to be decent human beings – but we frequently want something more, something much more specific. In teacher education we frequently want to help prospective teachers become reform-oriented teachers, committed to an ideal of social justice and deep content understanding. As teacher educators we know what they should fight for and we put them on that path. Edmundson disagrees – or perhaps he would say that a professional preparation is different from a humanist, transformative education. But clearly for him a transformative education does not stipulate the particular valued ends. He once asked another humanities professor what he tried to achieve in the classroom and this professor indicated that he certainly had particular directions in mind. It seemed, according to Edmundson, that if we pursued this professor's educational goals of greater skepticism and cultural enlargement, we could become more “humane ... more sensitive, more community minded, less materialistic, more civilized.” But then it seemed that this wasn't such a good idea. In fact, he writes:

. . . it strikes me as a very bad idea for us teachers to have a preexisting image of how we want our students to turn out, even as potentially attractive an idea as this teacher was offering. No I think what we need is for people to understand who and what they are now, then to be open to changing into their own highest mode of being. And that highest mode is something that they must identify by themselves, through encounters with the best that has been known and thought. We all have promise in us; it is up to education to reveal that promise, and to help it unfold. The power that is in you, says Emerson, is new in nature. And the best way to release that power is to let students confront viable versions of experience and take their choices. (p. 86)

Way too many of us, it seems, are unwilling to let the students view viable versions and choose. We want to construe which versions are commendable and ought to be pursued. We have little faith in students' inner selves. Edmundson embraces that faith and asks us to do the same, if, that is, we are to pursue a truly transformative education. We think this position requires attention.

The inner self and truth

Talk about the inner self stretches the content of many academics' somewhat brittle metaphysical catalogue. Add to this talk of the inner self a search for "truth" and it seems we begin to herald an outmoded epistemological quest and certainly a misguided educational journey. But Edmundson's conception of educational transformation will have it no other way, and we think he's right. A proper education is geared toward human transformation and offers literary, historical, and philosophical works that matter. "Works that matter work differently. Such works . . . can do many things, but preeminent

among them is their capacity to offer truth.” And what are these truths? How do we find them and what do we do with them. You probably won’t be surprised to hear that Edmundson has a response. He explains:

What I am asking when I ask of a major work (for only major works will sustain this question) whether it is true is quite simply this: Can you live it? Can you put it into action? Can you speak – or adapt – the language of this work, use it to talk to both yourself and others so as to live better? Is this work desirable as a source of belief? Or at the very least, can it influence your existing beliefs in consequential ways? (p. 56)

In our preparation of teachers we should be asking them what kind of teachers they want to become. We should be offering them major works that might, just might, offer them the opportunity to ask – What view of teaching allows me to live and teach better – to serve students best? Can I live this version of a teacher and how might I put it into action? Students’ responses to these consequential questions lie in the interplay, in a significant sense, between these works that offer truths and the source that lies within each of them.

For many academics the proposal that great works offer some version of truth is ludicrous and outmoded. We have discarded conceptions of truth in scholarship and education. Why try to bring truth back in? Edmundson suggests:

For the simple reason that for many people, the truths – the circle, the vision of experience – that they’ve encountered through socialization is inadequate. It doesn’t put them into a satisfying relation to experience. That truth does not give them what they want. It does not help them make a contribution to their society.

It does not, to advance another step, even allow for a clear sense of the tensions between themselves and the existing social norms, the prevailing doxa. . . . most people who go to literature and the liberal arts . . . demand other, better ways to apprehend the world – that is, ways that are better for them. (p. 52)

There is throughout Edmundson's text (2004) an abiding faith that most students have within them the power for discernment – for taking major works, examining their truths, and asking of themselves and others important life questions.

This faith is expressed most vividly when he explores Wordsworth's truth. For it is at this juncture in Edmundson's book that he, and Wordsworth, face the crumbling edifice of established religious thought. As a humanist, Edmundson knows quite well that human history and individual lives are replete with suffering, pain and anguish. Asking important life questions of students at critical junctures in their lives cannot ignore the pain, the depression, the heartache that comes with living. Others, of a more spiritual bent, recognize in this human frailty and vulnerability our lack of autonomy and the necessity to rely on something greater than themselves. Edmundson and Wordsworth, the secular humanists, will not accept a religious circle to enlarge their meaning in life. Wordsworth's and Edmundson's answer lies within. "Wordsworth's answer is that there is a part of himself that is free from the fallen society in which he's immersed. It is a part that lives on deep in him, although covered by custom, convention and fear." (57). Writing about Wordsworth's poem "Tintern Abbey" Edmundson explains . . . one also encounters the bracing hypothesis that depression or melancholia or what-have-you is a great force, to be sure, but that it is a force we may combat with individual resourcefulness and faith.... The site of our sufferings, what J. H.

Van den Berg called the overfilled inner self, may also be the source of our cure.

We are creatures who have the capacity to make ourselves sick, collectively and individually, but we often have the power to heal ourselves as well. (p.59)

For Wordsworth and Edmundson the power is within - this inner self. For Edmundson and others in the humanist tradition, human culture has produced texts and works of art, viable and strong, which enable this inner self to ricochet through and possibly be transformed in its search for truth.

Transformation in Teacher Education?

Some might believe that this loosely formulated transformative approach provides little guidance for teacher education and renounces responsibility for preparing teachers for today's and tomorrow's schools. We don't think so. Certainly, there are tensions that we have yet to address. We can't fully explore them here, but we will consider one in particular.

It might appear that a transformative approach in teacher education disavows preparing teachers to teach in particular ways. Earlier we had quoted Edmundson approvingly when he argued that it is a "very bad idea for us teachers to have a preexisting image of how we want our students to turn out . . .". And yet isn't it an obligation in professional teacher preparation to educate, prepare, and in some areas train teachers to teach in particular ways – in effect to turn out to be a particular kind of teachers? Is a transformative approach within teacher education committed to the practice of "spectrum education" – awakening to all possibilities but preparing for none? Given what we have said so far it might seem that way. But as former elementary and secondary teachers we know the value of teacher preparation – of providing candidates

with knowledge, dispositions, and skill sets that will enable them to understand and respond to the challenges of classroom, school and community life. So how can we reconcile the tensions between an education that asks students to identify their own particular vocational path and a professional preparation program that identifies the path to be taken? There are a variety of ways to live with this tension. One is to offer distinct traditions of teacher preparation. In the 60's, 70's and 80's some of us were trained as behaviorists, others as traditionalists and others as progressive reformers. Large schools of education could offer their pool of candidates distinct preparations paths. This has been done before – at Michigan State University and UCLA, for example. Smaller schools of education could articulate and promote one or two distinct and coherent programs to offer students. Within each state internally coherent alternatives and options could be developed. Students would know ahead of time the vocational options and they could choose.

Other tensions persist and obstacles exist within this humanist approach to teacher education. For some it might sound too much like a “great books” approach to teacher preparation – and within liberal teacher education circles that has a disconcertingly conservative ring. Related to this “great books” emphasis are nagging questions about the role of existing educational practice within teacher preparation. Certainly rich examples of classroom practice exist that can provide promising “texts” for exploration. What are some of the “great works of educational practice” and how can we engage them in this transformative program. For others this transformative approach might be construed as disavowing a commitment to social justice and democratic education. Again we think that response is mistaken. Together the three of us hold firmly to a belief

in and commitment to democratic schools and greater social justice. What we may not share with some of our readers is the belief that there is one main educational path to those valued ends. But these are all topics for another time.

We think what we have outlined here is neither so unusual nor unfeasible. In past editorials we have called for renewing meaningful conversations in teacher education. We hope this editorial might prompt such renewing interactions. And in our most recent editorial we maintained that school of education faculty might benefit from an enlarged understanding of the obstacles confronting schools and youth. Our call for transformative teacher education, we believe, could renew and enlarge. And if we are wrong we believe our conversations with others will point that out.

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