From Mind to Relationship: The Emerging Challenge

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I propose that the primary educational challenge of the present century is to replace the traditional focus on the individual student with concerted investments in relational process. Why do I say this, and what would it mean - both theoretically and practically? First consider our traditional view that the purpose of education is to impart knowledge to the individual student, to improve his or her capacity for reason and judgement. Good education, we say, will prepare the individual to participate productively in society, and to contribute as a responsible citizen to the democratic process. Such beliefs are also tied closely to our teaching practices. We hold the individual student responsible for his or her own work, we chart the progress of the individual, we evaluate and assign marks to individual performance; individual student scores are arrayed hierarchically for purposes of rewarding superior and correcting the deficient.

As we enter the new millennium, however, we are becoming increasingly - and often painfully - aware that this constellation of beliefs and practices is a child of another time. We find this child has now grown old, and in today's conditions of accelerating global change, seems increasingly dislocated and inept. We trace the birth of this child to the period of western Enlightenment. It is the celebration of the individual mind - one's capacity for autonomous thought and judgement - that provided a rationale for shaking off the monolithic control of Cross and Crown. In the making of western modernism, the celebration of the individual mind has also walked hand in hand with freedom, justice, and democracy.

So, why seek alternatives at this point? Aren't we just where we should be, and shouldn't our tradition be shared globally? For many the pain begins with the realization of the world we create when we celebrate the individual mind. When we believe the individual mind is the primary reality, we establish a gulf between self and other. We see ourselves as each living in our own isolated worlds. "I am here and you are there." We can never know what is in each other's mind - behind the mask of the eyes - so we cannot fully trust others' actions. Our primary task is thus to "take care of Number One." In this vision of the world relationships are artificial and secondary, to be sought primarily when it is useful for one's own purposes. A belief in the primacy of individual minds fosters a culture of loneliness, distrust, self-centeredness, and antagonism. And when self comes first, committed relations and community participation both deteriorate.

These misgivings with the individualist view are complemented by a growing body of scholarship exploring the communal basis of knowledge and reason. Here the Cartesian heritage of the lone thinker is found deeply wanting. Simply put, if we were to eliminate from the human mind all the concepts and logics supplied by the surrounding culture, what would be left over that would still count as reason? In isolation, could I think about issues of morality, justice, or the costs and benefits of various courses of action without a corpus of concepts and logics supplied to me from relations with others? To "reason well" is not to step outside of relationships for a "private moment," but to participate fully within them.

This view is writ large in broad-ranging scholarship demonstrating the dependency of scientific knowledge on communally shared understandings and values. On this view, the scientist never truly works alone; he or she is prepared by the community for what it is that can be discovered through observation. What we take to be knowledge is not so much a mirror of "the world as it is," but the outcome of an interpretive community attempting to realize its values within certain domains. Western medical knowledge, for example, is not so much "true" as it is functional in terms of western beliefs and values. Western medicine represents progress primarily within the conceptual arena shared or disseminated by western culture. Knowledge, then, issues from communities and not from the individual minds of its participants. (1)

The implications of this emerging consciousness for education are profound. Our attention first shifts from the mind of individual students to the kinds of relationships out of which viable knowledge can emerge. Further, we become sensitized to community differences and the ways in which knowledge in one may be dysfunctional within another. We begin to ask whose voices are present in any given knowledge making process and whose are absent or silenced. And we are alerted to the problems created by our traditional fields of knowledge. The separate disciplines of biology, literature and art, for example, are not required by "the way the world is," but reflect different community traditions. When these communities cease to communicate with each other - or indeed with the many communities making up society - the result is an injurious isolation.

Dialogues on such matters are also becoming increasingly central in the educational sphere. The work of educational leader, Jerome Bruner, provides an interesting weathervane. Bruner's work in the 1970s did much to stimulate the cognitive movement in education; here the character of individual reason was central. In his most recent work, The Culture of Education, Bruner points the way to knowledge as issuing from a "sub-community in interaction." (2) This shift in sensibility is also evident in a plethora of recent works on the significance of dialogue in education (3), on socially distributed cognition (4), and on the social constitution of the classroom (5). The pages of Education Canada have also been keenly sensitive to these issues, featuring for example, articles on citizenship education, telelearning, apprenticeship, the politics of curriculum, and more.

Importantly, I believe these deliberations in education form a significant counterpoint

to movements sweeping across the culture - if not the world. Partly owing to the profound technological transformations of the past century, we are brought together with increasing numbers of people, from differing locales, for differing purposes. Everywhere there is a need for collaboration, teamwork, networks, and negotiation. Continuous adjustments to a continuously changing sea of meaning and material is required. In the organizational sphere, for example, this reliance on relationship is reflected in moves from hierarchical to flattened structures and increased reliance on cross-functional teams for vital decisions. The shift toward collaborative construction is pivotal to the dramatic billowing of virtual organizations and international voluntary moments (NGOs). And it is on just such capacities for coordinated relationship that ecumenical movements, geo-political organizations (such as the European Community), and scientific research teams depend. Relational deliberation in education is essential if schools and universities are to be adequate to the profound transformations in the world more generally.

Speaking Practically

Theoretical discussions of relational processes relevant to the times are a good beginning. The ultimate question is whether such discussions can make a difference in practice. In my view there is already significant movement in the domain of pedagogy. It comes in many and varied forms, and when viewed together we begin to see a pattern from which we can draw nourishment for the future. Let me touch on three significant domains of educational innovation in a relational key.

From Monologue to Dialogue
There is a long history of critique of monologic pedagogy in which the teacher functions as high priest and students as supplicants. In terms of current dialogues, it is perhaps Friere's Pedagogy of the Oppressed that served as the major stimulus to innovation. Informed by Friere's critical sensitivity to the ideologies and values carried by all forms of disciplinary knowledge, teachers at all levels have generated means for questioning singular authorities and opened classes to broad participation. Critical pedagogy now sits side by side with a variety of less politicized forms of classroom collaboration. For example, in his work, Collaborative Learning, Kenneth Bruffee describes a range of practices designed to maximize student expression and interchange (7). Institutions such as Sudbury School have involved students in everything from curriculum design to deportment decisions; Patricia Lather challenges her students to write in multiple voices for differing audiences and purposes (8); novelist Ken Kesey and his students have gone so far as to write and publish a collective novel. Collaborative innovation is everywhere in motion.

From Isolated to Relational Rationality
In the individualist tradition there was a distinct division between he role of the teacher and that of the student, The former was to provide the best information and insight available and the latter's job was to master it. Student failure was typically attributed to the student's deficient capabilities, attitude, or motivation. In recent decades we have increasingly come to understand that effective student performance

is a collaborative achievement. The central fulcrum of collaboration is, of course, between the teacher and the student. Here increasing numbers are drawn to Lev Vygotsky's view that there is nothing in mind that is not first of all in culture, and to the significance of a close, sensitive and action centered relationship between teacher and student. For many this means a sophisticated form of apprenticeship (9). Communication specialist William Rawlins proposes that the most effective education emerges from a friendship relationship between teacher and student. (10)

Yet, it is not simply the student's relationship with the teacher that is important. Scholars and teachers are increasingly drawn to the importance of peer relations - friendships, cliques, racial and economic class antagonisms - that bear on the student's performance. More expansively, many educationalists draw attention to the broader social context of education. We increasingly understand the importance of poverty, ethnicity, and family composition, for example, in shaping the quality of student work. The performance of an individual is only a manifestation of a broad relational network. A student never succeeds or fails alone.

From Curricula to Cultural Criteria
In the individualist tradition, student performance is evaluated against the standards of a fixed curriculum. The logic and content of the curriculum - established prior to the student's presence - dictates what counts as "mastery." With increased sensitivity to relational context, we begin to see the limits of a self-contained, disciplinary based curriculum. Increasingly we see the walls of the classroom as an artificial barrier between educational and cultural process. Our activities in the world are seldom boxed in disciplinary packages, nor is effective reason ever cut away from often complex contexts. "Situated learning" is essential (11). It is in this vein that we may appreciate the innovative efforts of the many teachers who create links between the class and cultural context. For example, "authentic assessment" practices - in which students work together to solve complex problems in the outside environment and communicate their results to audiences other than the teacher - are slowly gaining momentum. More broadly visible are university programs in service learning; here community engagement serves as the educational matrix. More subtly but pervasively, educators increasingly send their students to explore the World Wide Web for multiple perspectives on a given issue. At Rice University the Gardiner Symonds teaching laboratory provides no lectern or desk for the teacher. Rather we find multiple computers, mobile chairs for students and teacher, and three multi-panelled walls onto which any computer can beam its contents, along side video and CD Rom materials (12). The class can travel virtually and simultaneously throughout the world.

Impediments and Invitations

My hope in this offering is to locate within the fragments of educational change an emerging pattern, and to place this pattern within a broader transformation of cultural - if not global -significance. At the same time I feel we have barely arrived at a starting place. In my view the vast share of educational practice remains lodged

within the individualist tradition. Among the most powerful impediments to relational change are the linked commitments to individual evaluation and standardized accountability. For varying reasons - good and bad - teachers are joined by parents and even students in desiring to know where the performance of each individual stands in comparison to others. Individualist ideology is as strong as it is pervasive. The investments in individual evaluation are intensified, however, when linked to standardized performance exams. When the view prevails that reason and knowledge are universal - transcending any particular community's needs and values - a brutal competition is invited - between students, schools, regions and even nations. A mono-logic rides roughshod over the richness of community tradition and need.

I conclude with a personal story, partly to underscore the need for grass roots engagement in relational challenge and as well to reflect on its potentials. Informed by the challenge of relationalism, I have experimented with replacing a term paper with a "term dialogue." Here students work in small groups on a challenging topic related to the course material. Each student makes a series of contributions to an ongoing electronic mail exchange. The primary grade is based on the quality of the dialogue - whether the entries enrich each other, bring out important facets of other offerings, inform the group, and thrust the dialogue in new directions. In my experience students love the process and experience significant benefit. Moreover,I find that I learn as well from the emerging discussions. Yet, although I evaluate the dialogue as a whole, students also insist that they receive a private mark according to their individual input. I falter, reflect, and ultimately capitulate to their desires. Perhaps innovations are best when they carry with them remnants of tradition. The discussion remains open...

FOOTNOTES

(1) For further treatment of these transformations and their global implications, see Gergen, K.J. (1999) An invitation to social construction. London: Sage, and Gergen, K.J. (2000) The saturated self (2nd. ed.) New York: Perseus.
(2) Bruner, J. (1996) The culture of education. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. p. 21
(3) Wells, G. (1999) Dialogic inquiry, Towards a sociocultural practice and theory of education. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
(4) Salomon, G. (19 93) Distributed cognition: Psychological and educational considerations. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
(5) See, for example, Hicks, D. (Ed.) (1996) Discourse, learning and schooling. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
(6) Friere, P. (1978) The pedagogy of the oppressed. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
(7) Bruffee, K. (1992) Collaborative learning. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
(8) Lather, P. (1994) Getting smart. New York: Routledge.
(9) Rogoff, B. (1990) Apprenticeship in thinking. New York: Oxford University Press.

(10) Rawlins, W. (2000) <u>Teaching as a mode of friendship</u>. Communication Theory, 10, 5-26.

(11) Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991) <u>Situated learning</u>. New York: Cambridge University Press.

(12) See cttl.rice.edu/projects/Symonds