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Mindfulness and Lifelong Learning – making sense of the therapeutic aims of education

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...While, with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things...

William Wordsworth – Tintern Abbey

The Aims of Education

In a recent issue of the Journal of Philosophy of Education the editor, Paul Standish, welcomed the fact that ‘questions of happiness and wellbeing are prominent in contemporary social policy and practice, and in current policy initiatives they abound’ (2007,p.285). The idea here is that the ultimate ends of education – self-esteem, job and life satisfaction, and the promotion of trust and social justice in the wider community – seem to be taken rather more seriously these days than they were in the drab neo-liberal and utilitarian 1980s and 90s. Standish goes on, however, to qualify these observations by noting – in the context of a review of recent books recording the rise and fall of progressive education – how certain central features of progressivism (creativity and individualism) are grossly mutated and manipulated in current policy and practice to serve non-progressive and exclusively economistic ends.

This qualification is certainly necessary at a time when the affective dimension of learning – in the form of criticisms of an alleged ‘therapeutic turn’ – is under attack. A few years ago, I offered a tentative response (Hyland, 2005, 2006) to Ecclestone’s (2004) concerns about educators’ obsession with developing self-esteem and emotional intelligence. It seemed to me that the so-called therapeutic turn was no more than a proper concern with the affective dimension of learning and, moreover, that this needed to be emphasised in the face of the relentless vocationalisation of everything under the label of behaviourist skills and competences. The original worries and concerns, however, still seem to be around. Ecclestone and Hayes (2008) have recently collaborated on a book which charts the ‘dangerous rise’ of therapeutic ideas at all levels of the system and – offering general support for these
critics of therapy In the context of the discourse on adult education theory and practice – Thompson (2007) has expressed similar misgivings. She observes that:

In the popular wisdom of adult education practice it is certainly the case that ideas about confidence, emotional intelligence, and self-esteem are commonplace. The literature of funding applications, project reports and evaluation exercises are full of claims by policy-makers and practitioners alike that interventions targeted at so-called non-traditional learners and socially excluded groups give rise to increased confidence and self-esteem (p.303).

Such developments, Thompson argues, are dangerous – not only because they neglect or marginalise some of the traditional core values of adult learning concerned with developing knowledge and understanding for active citizenship – but also in their tendency to suggest that ‘developing confidence and self-esteem can remedy a wide range of personal and social problems’ with the result that this ‘distracts attention from the structural causes of inequality…and from the widening gap between rich and poor more generally’ (p.304).

**Therapy and Education: Some Reflections**

In earlier observations, I noted that the bleak picture of a post-school sector dominated by objectives linked to self-esteem and emotional intelligence was not one which was easily recognisable (Hyland, 2006). On the contrary, it seems reasonable to suggest that the current educational climate is seriously impoverished through the dominance of prescriptive skill-talk and behaviourist competence outcomes. However, although the worries about the rise of therapy are almost certainly exaggerated and unjustified, the concerns of critics are sincere and need to be addressed. One way of doing this would be to show how educational and therapeutic processes are interrelated.

It is a question of coherence and balance. We all want to be happy but, as Dearden (1972) correctly argues, the ‘aim of education cannot simply be happiness, quite without qualification’ (p.111). However, as he goes on to emphasise, there ‘is no question of whether or not happiness is valuable…the question is rather that of how important happiness is, compared with other values, in a specifically educational situation’ (p.109). Similarly, Smith (2002) suggests that ‘self-esteem can usefully be admitted into our educational scheme of things as a significant good, but not one pursued directly, still less exclusively’ (p.99). For educational purposes, what needs
to be attached to all-embracing external ends about self-esteem, happiness or human flourishing are internal objectives concerned with the development of knowledge, understanding, autonomy and values which will enable those being educated to construct and participate in communities which promote and reinforce such flourishing. The affective dimension of educational activity – linked to both processes in terms of stimulating learners’ interests and motivation and also to content in the acknowledgement that knowledge and skills cannot be completely separated from human values and emotions – is arguably what is being highlighted in referring to these therapeutic aims of education.

Peters (1972) has demonstrated the clear and distinct connections between human emotions, motivation and the sort of reasoning associated with the development of knowledge and understanding, and this seems to be what Smith (2002) is alluding to in arguing that to ‘say that we might make room for self-esteem without allowing it to take over the entire house of education or of therapy is to say that we need to see learning, personal identity, motivation and related matters through a wider lens’ (pp.99-100). Wilson (1972) is getting at something similar when he argues that ‘we can say that certain educational processes just are the same as some processes which increase mental health: that some forms of teaching are identical with some forms of psychotherapy’ (p.89, original italics). The idea is that both learning and therapy involve the development of knowledge, values, emotions, understanding, reason, skill, experience and insight, and both are equally necessary for accessing work, social relationships and the wider communities of practice which constitute the good life. This is the notion of therapeutic education – captured perfectly in Harris’ (2004) robustly secular concept of spiritual practice as a process of ‘investigating the nature of consciousness directly, though sustained introspection’ (p.209) – I am advocating here, one which, arguably, is closely linked to the Socratic/Platonic project of approximating to reality by exposing and eliminating ignorance and delusion.

**The Nature of Mindfulness**

In advocating and seeking to justify a form of therapeutic education along the lines outlined above, it is worth taking note of both the intrinsic and pragmatic value of the concept of ‘mindfulness’ (beautifully captured in the Wordsworth extract above). This is a core concept in Buddhist philosophy (technically the seventh strand of the
eightfold path to nirvana and the end of suffering) though it is now widely influential in an array of fields far removed from its original home. Thich Nhat Hanh (1999) – a world-renowned Vietnamese Buddhist teacher and campaigner for global peace and justice – describes mindfulness as being ‘at the heart of the Buddha’s teachings’. It involves ‘attention to the present moment’ which is ‘inclusive and loving’ and ‘which accepts everything without judging or reacting (p.64). Kabat-Zinn and associates have been largely responsible for transforming the original spiritual notion into a powerful and ubiquitous therapeutic tool based on forms of meditation and mindful practices. Mindfulness simply means ‘paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally’ in a way which ‘nurtures greater awareness, clarity, and acceptance of present-moment reality’. Such practice – whether this involves breathing or walking meditation or giving full non-judgmental attention to everyday activities – can offer a ‘powerful route for getting ourselves unstuck, back in touch with our own wisdom and vitality’ (1994, pp.4-5). Such a simple idea has proved astonishingly successful in a vast range of contexts including the treatment of depression, addictions of various kinds, and the promotion of physical and mental health and wellbeing generally (Baer, 2006).

If all this still seems a bit too much like passive navel-gazing, it is worth noting that – in the form of ‘socially engaged Buddhism’ (Garfinkel, 2006; a movement pioneered by Thich Nhat Hanh) – mindfulness practices are employed in prison education, peace negotiations and the re-generation of village communities in deprived areas around the world. As Garfinkel explains, such practice is:

being applied to augment mental and physical health therapies and to advance political and environmental reforms. Athletes use it to sharpen their game. Through it, corporate executives learn to handle stress better. Police arm themselves with it to defuse volatile situations. Chronic pain sufferers apply it as a coping salve. (p.3).

The intrinsic value of mindfulness – connected with the ends of personal growth and wellbeing – have, arguably, always been core elements in learning. Pragmatic values are contained in the use of mindfulness-based techniques (guided breath and movement meditation, mind-focussing activities; see Langer, 2003; also www.essential-education.org) to engage learners’ interests and motivation and to link all forms of learning to the wider social and political issues which, as Thompson (2007) reminds us, are also legitimate educational goals. However, her worries that ‘lifelong learning has given up on teaching an understanding of the world, let alone
trying to change it’ – with educators now guided by the slogan ‘if you cannot change the world, change yourself’ (pp.301-2) – are unduly pessimistic. The world can only be changed by people and often the reflective capacity to change ourselves is precisely what is required before any wider social change is possible. Within Buddhist traditions, this transformation is normally described as the approximation to ‘non-self’, a process described by Brazier (2003) as one which ‘places people in dynamic encounter with one another’ and ‘acknowledges the ever-unfolding social process and the ways in which people provide conditions for one another’ (p.138).

The immense power and potential of mindfulness – in terms of its central feature of paying close attention to our thought processes – is not to be under-estimated. In its normal state, the mind is often in flux as it fixes on one object after another in a random and dissipated manner. By ‘cultivating mindfulness’, the Dalai Lama (2005), reminds us, ‘we learn first to become aware of this process of dissipation, so that we can gently fine-tune the mind to follow a more directed path towards the objects on which we wish to focus’ (p.160). It is important to note that such attention has a deliberate intention that helps us select a specific aspect or a characteristic of an object. The continued, voluntary application of attention is what helps us maintain a sustained focus on the chosen object. Training in attention is closely linked with learning how to control our mental processes (ibid., p.161).

From an educational point of view this insight into and attempt to understand and influence consciousness is clearly crucial and, arguably, a necessary prerequisite of learning of any kind whether this involves the acquisition of skills or the fostering of values and knowledge.

**Mindfulness and the Aims of Education**

Smith (2002) is quite correct to locate self-esteem amongst the legitimate aims of education, and a qualified role for this dimension of education has also been advocated by Cigman (2004) and Kristjansson (2007). I have tried to provide a justification for a more general therapeutic function based on the notion of mindfulness. Mindfulness serves to remind us that – in addition to the important goals of developing knowledge, understanding, vocational skills and the critical examination of issues of inequality, prejudice and social exclusion – there are people with identities, needs, values and life stories who are engaged in the struggle to deal
with all this. Much current educational practice fails to capture this struggle and does not touch the emotional grief and suffering involved.

In a number of writings over the last few years, James (2007, 2008) has argued that levels of emotional distress in industrialised, urbanised societies are much higher for English-speaking countries such as Britain, United States, Canada and New Zealand than they are in other nations such as France, Spain, Belgium, Japan and the Scandinavian states. Using the WHO definition of emotional distress to include illnesses such as ‘depression, anxiety, substance abuse and impulse disorder’ James (2008, p. 10) contends that – contra recent trends – such distress has little genetic causation but is directly linked to both parental upbringing and the impact of ‘selfish capitalism’ which expounds radically materialistic values in conjunction with bringing about a deterioration of income levels and working conditions for millions of ordinary people in mainly English-speaking countries over the last thirty years or so. Such generalised emotional distress is paralleled by increasing levels of mental health problems in post-school education and training (Warwick, et al, 2008), a sector which has witnessed a relentless rise of economistic materialism and a decline of humanistic values over the last few decades (Hyland, 1998).

This is where mindfulness comes into its own since its raison d’etre (at least in its contemporary therapeutic role) is exactly that of maintaining emotional balance and well-being in a radically de-stabilising, materialistic culture. There is now a body of evidence from neuroscientific studies pointing to the ‘neuroplasticity’ of the brain – the idea that ‘experience can create structural changes in the brain’ (Siegel, 2007, p. 31). The idea is that by attending to our thoughts and perceptions, focussing on and re-appraising various aspects of them, we can actually influence brain chemistry and function. Since such internal awareness and focus of attention is central to mindfulness strategies, such practices can serve valuable therapeutic purposes, and here the concept of therapy should be interpreted within the framework of the Socratic tradition referred to earlier as a means of eliminating delusion, fostering understanding and developing genuine insight and knowledge about ourselves and the world.

As a dimension of the learning process, mindfulness practice can effectively link all forms of learning with the needs, interests and values of learners thus fostering engagement, motivation and that form of ‘studentship’ which, as Bloomer & Hodkinson (1997) have shown, is crucial in allowing post-school learners to make
sense and take ownership of the various programmes they are following. The ‘present-moment reality’ developed through mindfulness is now widely acknowledged in educational psychology as not just ‘more effective, but also more enjoyable’ (Langer, 2003, p.43) in many spheres of learning, and there is now a wealth of evidence aggregated through the Mindfulness in Education Network (http://www.mindfuled.org) about the general educational benefits of the approach. (there is also an established centre for mindfulness teaching and research at the University of Wales, Bangor, http://www.bangor.ac.uk/imscar/mindfulness).

In a relentlessly materialistic culture and an overly-technicist and value-impoverished educational climate, there has never been a better time to cultivate that form of mindfulness which ‘helps us look deeply into the depths of our consciousness’ (Hanh, 1999, p.75).

References


