Reading 16

Guided adventures in learning

Robert E. Floden and Margaret Buchmann

Notes

Floden and Buchmann present a controversial argument in this reading. They suggest that the common-sense idea that learning should always be built on the everyday experience of learners is false and potentially damaging to both good learning and to equity.

They suggest, in an argument that is reminiscent of Bettelheim and Zelan's, that good learning requires breaks with the every day. They call these breaks 'guided adventures'. They say, for instance, that learning new and completely alien knowledge in something like science is an exciting 'adventure' for learners.

Later, they show how certain kinds of 'relevance', or 'meaningfulness', are vital for good learning. But they also argue that a 'meaningfulness' defined instrumentally – as learning that is directly useful to life – will limit conceptual learning and education more generally.

Reading

During this century, American schools have increasingly come to be seen in a continuum of experience that spans family, community, and the world of work. Secondary school teachers are urged to make courses ***relevant*** to their students' lives and expected careers. Elementary school teachers are advised to stress the ***utility*** of mathematics and spelling. Many educators assume that without such links students will not be motivated and will have difficulty learning.

Emphasizing continuity with everyday life, however, can confuse ***regard for students and their interests*** with ***accepting all personal beliefs*** and ***overly stressing the practical relevance of school learning***.

Emphasizing this continuity [between everyday life and schooling]

This edited extract is from R. E. Floden and M. Buchmann, 'Breaking with everyday experience for guided adventures in learning' in M. Buchmann and R. E. Floden (eds.), ***Detachment and Concern: Conversations in the Philosophy of Teaching and Teacher Education*** *(London, Cassell, 1993).*

also conflicts with two central goals of schools: promoting ***equality of opportunity*** and ***disciplinary learning***. For unless students can ***break*** with their everyday experience in thought, they cannot see the extraordinary range of options for living and thinking; and unless students can give up many common-sense beliefs, they may find it impossible to learn disciplinary concepts that describe the world in diverse, surprising ways.

Everyone lives in a particular, restricted time and place,

> *'but school and university are **places apart** where a declared learner is emancipated from the limitations of his local circumstances and from the wants he may happen to have acquired, and is moved by intimations of what he has never yet dreamed'. (Oakeshott, 1989, p. 24)*

By emphasizing continuity with everyday life, educators ***destroy some of the strengths of schooling.*** If family, job, church, or other social institutions were to take responsibility for developing children's power to break with everyday experience in an environment sheltered for purposes of learning, the school's role would be less important. Currently, though, no other institution takes that responsibility, and schools seem to lose sight of that role. Hence, many students do not learn to see the limits and idiosyncrasies of the given.

We aim to recover the meaning of school as a place set apart, where truth and the social order do not coincide. To this purpose, we examine breaks with experience as ***adventures in learning,*** show why they are required for equality and disciplinary knowledge, and discuss how educators can foster such breaks.

[…]

Breaking with everyday experience

Everyday life is not set up for learning that ***transcends its own boundaries*** and ***suspends its immediate purposes.***

It is rich in experiences that are vivid and compelling, while appearing self-evident in their meaning. All of these attributes are two-edged swords. While giving contextual learning power, they also restrict people's scope of vision, exaggerate the reliability and importance of close-to-home experience, and make it difficult to grasp concepts from the disciplines of knowledge.

When someone is in the 'natural attitude', the world feels centred in time and space around oneself, and objects are important mostly for achieving personal ends. The structure and reality of this egocentric world are taken for granted and ordinarily not made the object of reflection.

*This supports the **false belief** that the actual and the possible are iden-*

tical and that local perspectives are unassailable.

Just as it seems that one's individual perspective gets at the nature of things, so it appears that one's social or ethnic group has the proper views. These socio-centric and ethno-centric natural attitudes are even more powerful.

Socio-centrism can affect scientists just as it affects garment workers; ethno-centrism can affect whites as much as Hispanics. No individual or group is immune to the deceptions of the natural attitude. People go about their lives assuming that ***their*** group's patterns of acting and thinking are not open to question; ***these patterns are so familiar that they become invisible.***

When such patterns are not seen, alternatives are not envisioned either. Even if alternatives could be considered, the natural attitude gives undue weight to the familiar, which is both vivid and readily available in memory.

Limitations and distortions make it important to break with the natural attitude and to achieve greater distance from ego-centric and socio-centric patterns of acting and thinking.

Educational philosophers characterize this change of perspective as a move towards objectivity. Greater objectivity means moving away from the point of view of a particular self or social group, living in some definite time and place. The crux is that objectivity means seeing the world not from within but, as it were, from without. Oneself or one's group is not seen as the centre of things, but as part of a larger, variegated picture.

Objectivity also allows seeing circumstances and phenomena from more than one perspective, varying in distance to the contingent self. Another part of objectivity's appeal stems from the sense that breaking with the natural attitude implies responding to the ideal of truth:

> *'We flee the subjective under the pressure of an assumption that everything must be something not to any point of view, but in itself. To grasp this by detaching more and more from our own point of view is the unreachable ideal at which the pursuit of objectivity aims.' (Nagel, 1979, p. 208)*

Moving towards objectivity requires being able both to recognize other perspectives and to select those perspectives that are most appropriate for a matter at hand.

The detachment presupposed by objectivity is ***not indifference***, but rather the sense that many modes of thinking and acting familiar to oneself seem strange to other people and that some of one's ideas and actions may have to be changed for good reasons. However, we usually are not ready to abandon the natural attitude

> *'without having experienced a specific shock which compels us to break through the limits of this "finite" province of meaning and to shift the accent of reality to another one'. (Schutz, 1962, p. 231)*

This shift may happen in dreaming, watching a theatre production, switching from one language to another, or having an adventure.

Schooling as guided adventures in thinking

The image of an adventure provides a metaphor for educative breaks with experience.

An adventure interrupts the integrated consistency and predictable flow of life and thought. An adventure may be educative if it also centrally connects with a person's sense of self, capacities, and of developing understandings. As Simmel (1959) puts it:

> *'An adventure […] occurs outside the usual continuity of this life. Nevertheless, it is distinct from all that is accidental and alien, merely touching life's outer shell. While it falls outside the context of life, it falls, with this same movement, as it were, back into that context again […]; it is a foreign body in our existence which is yet somehow connected with the centre.' (p. 243)*

Such adventures, like educative breaks with everyday experience, are linked to the springs of human learning.

Breaks with everyday experience are more likely to be educative if they occur in a setting created to make the most of deviations from the usual or seemingly fated course. Ordinary life, however, does not screen breaks for worthwhile directions and effects, warding off those that are untimely or damaging. In a sense, every self-chosen action means that 'a human being lets go a mooring and puts out to sea on a […] largely unforeseen course'. (Oakeshott, 1989, p. 23)

Schools can turn some vicissitudes of existence and ordeals of consciousness into guided adventures in learning. The separateness of school can shelter youngsters from the enveloping nature of the taken-for-granted and the press of immediacy, so that they can confront the world they inhabit through conscious knowing and valuing.

Everyday experience reinforces inequality

More often than not, life teaches people that they have to fit themselves into the scheme of things. As part of their socialization, children learn what to expect from life. They learn how they are expected to act and how other people will act towards them. They adopt notions of what is true and right, often without much capacity for judgement and reflection. Such expectations stretch into the future of jobs, families, and community roles – and they are not the same for all children.

Some youngsters see themselves progressing through high school,

university, and professional school, imagining vacations in the Caribbean and a condominium in the mountains; others plan to escape from school at the earliest opportunity, to help out at home or save their overtime pay for a new car. Some envision campaign contributions to politicians who will protect their interests; others expect to give their votes to whichever party will keep their streets in good repair; and some see no point in voting.

To have more equal opportunities, children must imagine themselves in futures not determined by their immediate environments and local beliefs. No matter how much a school is able to raise a student's achievement test scores, the increase does little to equalize opportunities unless students can see and act on the possibilities created. Understanding what happens to oneself and envisioning what, could require more objective perspectives and lively imagination.

Everyday concepts frustrate disciplinary learning

The academic disciplines provide perspectives that draw on accumulated, systematically tested, and creatively imagined human experiences. They are also guides in judgement, preventing people from falling into the relativistic trap of thinking that all perspectives have equal merit. Arguments for disciplinary understandings as a central educational goal resemble our general case for breaks with everyday experience. As with equal opportunity, acquiring such distancing and liberating understandings is frustrated by relying on everyday experience.

Students enter school with concepts and methods for understanding and acting on the world around them. They have ideas about physical principles and about people. But many of these naive conceptions conflict with disciplinary understandings. Moreover, some disciplinary concepts do not refer to everyday experience at all. When children encounter science in school, this subject conveys fascinatingly new and ***different*** information about the world: it is the sun, and not the earth, that stands still; hammers dissolve into electrons and protons; water is actually a combination of gases and so on. There are also concepts with no counterparts in the everyday world, such as latent heat.

Because of the human tendency to try to incorporate new experience into old frameworks, students often assimilate school learning into their naive conceptions, even when those conceptions are not appropriate. Thus, many students may continue to believe that the earth is flat or that continual force is needed to maintain constant velocity. This tendency is so strong that everyday conceptions persist, even in the face of instruction that contradicts them. In part, their robustness may be due to the fact that everyday conceptions have served students well outside school.

To learn the disciplines, students need instruction that helps them to see the limits and distortions in their everyday conceptions, not instruction that encourages them to think that disciplinary concepts are mere variants of their everyday beliefs. People are beginning to understand

the conditions under which students will give up everyday beliefs and replace them with disciplinary concepts.

[…]

Changing our teaching

If schools are to develop students' capacities to break with everyday experience for purposes of learning, changes in the content and methods of instruction are needed.

The work of Vygotsky (1962, 1978) lends support to instructional approaches that strive for greater ***separation from*** – not more continuity with – students' everyday experiences. Vygotsky concludes from his studies of school learning that children do not acquire systematic understanding of academic subjects by drawing on the concepts they bring with them. Children are not consciously aware of these concepts and thus cannot work with them abstractly.

For example, concepts of family relationships (such as brother, sister, mother etc.) can be applied to concrete situations, but ***not*** to answering abstract questions of kinship (such as the identity of a brother's father's sister). Children eventually become conscious of these logical relations, but may be confused because everyday concepts are 'saturated with experience'. (Vygotsky, 1962, p. 108)

By contrast, abstract concepts (such as the concept of exploitation) are learnt consciously; their lack of concrete reference allows children to keep conceptual relations straight.

Note

Pay attention to this argument; it is controversial. The writers argue that teachers should *not* proceed from the everyday experience of learners because this limits their ability to think conceptually. Instead they must begin with the abstract – the break with the everyday – and later link back to everyday experience. What do you think?

Teachers should be wary of introducing students to new ideas by pointing out their relations to everyday concepts and ways of thinking. Instead, teaching should often begin with material divorced from everyday life. Links to experience can eventually be made, but within the abstract conceptual system.

Vygotsky (1962) contends that this instructional approach – favouring awareness of one's own thinking – also favours reflection. School instruction induces the ***generalizing kind of perception*** and thus plays a decisive role in making the child conscious of his own mental processes. Scientific concepts, with their hierarchical system of interrelationships, seem to be the medium within which awareness and mastery first develop, to be transferred later to other concepts and other areas of thought.

Reflective consciousness comes to the child through the portals of scientific concepts.

Learning to reflect

Acquiring the ability for systematic reflection is a process of several steps. In it an adult takes responsibility for directing the student's learning.

First the child is led through the steps of some task, without being able to do the task alone or, presumably, understanding why the individual steps are being taken. As the child learns to repeat these steps habitually, she learns to do the task independently.

In a study of mothers teaching their pre-school children, Wertsch (1979) examines how children make the transition from adult-directed performance to independent, appropriate action. Wertsch suggests that because children are motivated to make sense of what they do, being guided to perform a strange task creates the incentive for moving towards new capacities and understandings. School instruction could, likewise, lure students into unfamiliar subject matter.

Adventures in learning can occur with guidance from a teacher, but without initial clarity about their purpose and promise. This argument applies to learning in the liberal arts as well as to learning scientific or moral concepts. Universities may attract students on the supposition of career benefits, but actually deliver human goods – including the capacity to stand back from the particulars of everyday experience – that students will appreciate only ***after*** they have made them their own.

Learning what good literature is and what it can offer (multiple and deepening readings of life and people, for example) may depend on a leap into reading good literature. Similarly, students must acquire habits of moral thought and action before they can become autonomous moral agents.

To conclude, in many areas of school instruction, students can transcend given ways of thinking and acting by first acquiring habits whose components they can imitate and practice but whose purposes they initially do not understand. Such transcendence requires schooling that breaks with the natural attitude and everyday understandings. While this separation

may forfeit immediate relevance, there are distinctive educational gains. However, the popularity of continuity with everyday experience as a principle of curriculum and instruction derives, in part, from cultural and common-sense beliefs that identify the value of education with its practical usefulness. This view of what makes education valuable in part underlies the call for 'meaningfulness' in school instruction.

Shouldn't schooling be meaningful?

Some will object to the argument that schools must provide ***breaks with everyday experience,*** saying that such breaks will make schooling less meaningful. Instructional content that is not meaningful, people argue, will be difficult for students to understand and remember. They will also not be motivated to learn it.

This objection to our case for educative breaks for purposes of learning rests on the ambiguity of the term ***meaningful,*** which has at least three senses. To call something meaningful can signify that it is related to prior knowledge, practically relevant, or closely tied to everyday life.

In its first sense, meaningfulness is important for learning; but this sense does not support an objection to breaks with everyday experience, for educative breaks do not require discontinuity with all knowledge.

Breaks with everyday experience do lead to loss of meaningfulness in the second and third senses, but the educational value of practical relevance and continuity with everyday life is, as we argue throughout this chapter, debatable. Moreover, getting access to new concepts and meanings is not inconsistent with opening up new systems of practical relevancy, as well as creating new patterns of thought and action that grow to be 'close to home' (in other words, habits of reflection).

The force of the meaningfulness objection seems based on the fallacy of equivocation: using the first sense to argue that meaningfulness is crucial, then drawing on the common-sense appeal of the other senses to suggest that breaks with ***everyday*** knowledge are not defensible.

Relationships to prior knowledge

Meaningful instruction in the first sense (instruction relating to prior knowledge) is endorsed by common sense and psychology. It is trivially true that things to be learnt must in ***some*** way be related ***to some*** prior knowledge. Research supporting this sense of meaningfulness relies on interpretations of 'related to' that encompass a wide variety of relationships, from simple associations to conceptual links. Thus people's capacity to memorize a list of objects may be increased by imagining a familiar walk and associating each item on the list with a place passed during this mental journey.

The argument for guided adventures in learning would be damaged if

educative breaks with experience were meaningless in this first sense. But the breaks we advocate are with ***everyday*** knowledge, not with all knowledge. As psychological studies of meaningfulness show, one can meet the general requirement for relationships to prior knowledge by interpreting 'relationships' and 'prior knowledge' in diverse ways. Having lessons relate to disciplinary knowledge or conceptual systems acquired in earlier instruction fits this sense of meaningfulness.

The criterion of relation to prior knowledge is not an all-or-nothing affair. Although psychologists occasionally write as if meaningfulness (in this sense) were dichotomous, there are differing degrees of meaningfulness, depending on the extent to which the material to be learnt can be related to what the learner knows already. In working with methods and content different from everyday experience, students may begin with only a faint idea of what it all means, but that beckoning glimmer of understanding could suffice to make the instruction meaningful. A gradual deepening and spreading of significant relationships is consistent with the picture of educative breaks described earlier.

Practical relevance

In its sense of practical relevance, meaningfulness is commonly considered a prime source of motivation for learning. This sense merges making instruction meaningful into demonstrating to students that instructional content can be put to use outside of school, either now or in the future. Meaningfulness in this second sense depends on an instrumental view of school knowledge and an understanding of value in terms of utility. Since practical relevance implies integrated relations with everyday activities, this interpretation of meaningfulness is inconsistent with the educative breaks we advocate. If practical relevance were decisive for valuable and successful instruction, it would support a serious objection to making schools break with everyday experience. Developing motivation to learn, however, does not depend on showing the practical relevance of schoolwork and may, in fact, be hindered by such an emphasis.