

The wicked problem of pedagogy

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Abstract

In this essay, Ellsworth argues that the questions and challenges of pedagogy are not problems to be solved once and for all. It is impossible either to escape from or master pedagogy, because education itself is a contributor to and participant in the world's ongoing predicaments. She suggests that educators activate pedagogy as a pretext and occasion for transforming "knowledge as a thing made" into "knowledge-in-the-making:" a lived event of learning that is contemporaneous with the forces acting upon us.

Keywords: pedagogy, knowledge, education

O difícil problema da pedagogia

Resumo

Neste artigo, Ellsworth argumenta que as questões e desafios da pedagogia não são problemas a serem resolvidos de uma vez por todas. É impossível tanto escapar da pedagogia quanto dominá-la, porque a própria educação é um contribuinte e participante das atuais dificuldades do mundo. Ela sugere que os educadores ativem a pedagogia como pretexto e ocasião para transformar o "conhecimento como algo pronto" em "conhecimento em formação": um evento de aprendizado como vivência que seja contemporâneo com as forças que agem sobre nós.

Palavras-chaves: pedagogia, conhecimento, educação.

In the end, education is not a question of appropriate, acceptable, or productive formats. Even after all is said and done about "learning through digital media," the question of pedagogy continues. Pedagogy is what needs to be worked out again and again. (SCHMITZ, 2007, p. 147).

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This is because pedagogy is not a system and cannot be systematized. Pedagogical set-ups function only in theory. What is set up in a pedagogical design and what students and teachers actually take up are neither scripted nor linear. To think pedagogically is to think in terms of, and in the midst of, situations and the highly particular. Pedagogy “disciplines” students through their passions for learning, not through rules or systems. It disciplines through curiosity and exchange, not through predetermined objectives and goals. Pedagogy does not follow rules, nor does it rule—but pedagogy also is NOT antagonistic or chaotic. Pedagogy is a living form.

Pedagogical designs need to be worked out again and again

The institutionalization of learning has to do with the possibilities for change. Institutions of education must continuously deal with and account for learning’s need to be different each time. The job of an institution of education is to administer for, with, and to pedagogy’s need to be worked out again and again. This is also the job of any digital learning platform or environment.

Pedagogy, in other words, is a wicked problem—not a strategy.

Wicked problems are problems that can’t or haven’t been fully defined. Questions about them can always be asked and reformulated. There is no explicit end to a wicked problem because solutions can always be developed further. Differing formulations imply differing solutions—which are never either correct or incorrect, but for which plausible alternatives, other pathways and approaches, are always possible.

Education is wickedly in and of the world. It’s not a response to the world from somewhere else than the world. Education is a contributor to and a participant in the world’s ongoing complexities—in its continuation (ROGOFF, 2007, p. 39).

Complex contemporary problems (technical, social, global, economic, ethical) are now leading new social collectivities to experiment with aspects of learning not often recognized (and sometimes devalued) in higher education: emotional intelligence, affective connection, embodied and emplaced learning, activating capacities for risk-taking and uncertainty, collaborative thinking, “thinking with” objects and media, making as thinking, abductive participation and thinking, speculative knowledge production, distributed cognition.

Practices such as these are efforts to grapple with an urgent question: What modes of thinking-sensing might be of most use within the contemporary conditions of material life on this planet? Some responses to that question are provoking shifts in valuation, from valuing codified knowledge above all to evaluating emergent knowledge that is not yet fully articulated or “understood;” and from valuing structure as basis, starting point and perspective to valuing process/motion/change as basis, starting point and perspective.

For some, preoccupations with cognition are giving way to curiosity about how we might design and facilitate learning environments that activate complex human relational dynamics, such as: mind-brain-body + material situation + human interdependence.

It is as if Westernized humans are rediscovering the force of the “brute materiality” of embodied life on planet Earth. Increasingly, it seems that contemporary lived experiences are throwing into sharp relief the fact that what is “most real” are not forms, essences, themes, or objects, but rather, forces, intensities, densities, movement, change.

For those who eagerly engage with wicked problems, the attractive force of knowledge as a thing made is giving way to the attractive force of “knowledge in-the-making.” This shift is happening at the hands of hybrid artists/teachers/researchers/communicators/activists—those provocative testers who design and make doubt-filled gestures, equivocal objects, tentative projections, hopeful anticipations, physical encounters. The attractive force of questions that strive for cognitive command and control—for definition, categorization, and certainty—is giving way to the attractive force of questions framed as “wicked problems.”

In *Reinventing Knowledge: from Alexandria to the Internet*, Ian McNeely (2008) declared that a shift in cultural habits is taking place. There is an impatience for new ideas and means. He charts how this shift is redirecting institutions of learning and knowledge production from: monastery to university to laboratory to social platform; from codifier of knowledge to knowledge producers; from curriculum to conversation; and from teacher-student transfer models to self-organizing research and activities (MCNEELY, 2008).

The life of the mind, which was the basis for previous models of education, McNeely says, is undergoing a structural transformation (p. xxi).

It appears that it is impossible to either escape from or master education as a wicked problem. So, what if we use pedagogy to explore precarity's potential? What if we use pedagogy to pursue wobbly balancing acts and moments of fleeting equilibrium, and to gracefully parry the forces that act upon us?

According to McNeely, the next knowledge institution will be a hybrid of experimental knowledge production + disciplinary knowledge. It will apply learning in experimental settings to engage with public needs, most likely in response to environmental urgencies. The next knowledge institution will connect the production of knowledge with the production of consequences.

Because it is processual, learning is unrepresentable: its means and ends emerge in the flow of activity. And this means there is no basis or regularity on which education's effects and affects can be staked.

To paraphrase Schmitz, the stake of education resides in the “unscripted conjunctions and confusions between what is set up, what is produced and what can be done . . . and that what is triggered in the process matters to education but is never part of its original set-up” (Schmitz, 2007, p. 143). Which brings Schmitz to the question: what is it about education that is actually worth charting—or, as they say, assessing? The pedagogical set-up is a teaser, a guess, a speculation. It's a summoning of best guesses. It's a speculation that attempts to suture and suspend what is a crucial amount of slippage between the external architecture of a pedagogical set-up and whatever may play out inside the undisclosed, internal take-ups by student bodies, individual and collective. The “results” of a pedagogical set-up don't respond to given questions or problems or solutions. They generate problematics instead (SCHMITZ, 2007, p. 141-3).

What is made of pedagogy is: how we assess it. That is why “learning” requires wicked forms of “assessment.”

The experience of learning is an experience of thinking-sensing differently. Pedagogy's dream and desire is to spring lived events during which thinking/sensing becomes different. When learning is non-compliant, it opens the future to difference. Non-compliant learning is what learning can sometimes become when we aren't channeling it into “training,” or when we entice it to inaugurate something new and previously unthought. In non-compliant learning, the pedagogical event is a strange becoming. Here,

learning is not something that happens to us. Nor is it something in us. We are in learning whenever we learn.

In the midst of a non-compliant learning experience, knowledge is no longer a thing made. It undergoes a phase shift to become a thing in-the-making.

The space and time of this shift is precisely where and when pedagogy's power becomes apparent and actualized. In the event of this shift, pedagogy opens the future to difference.

After all, as a thing made, knowledge already arrived at is merely half-living. But its inadequacy for life is exactly what makes it useful and valuable. Its failure as permanent answer, absolute truth, or complete solution becomes a potent provocation to action. Pedagogy that desires noncompliant learning honors received knowledge for the way it can be made to function as a "promise, as that which, in the future, in retrospect, yields a destination or effect, another thing"—another knowing (GROSZ, 2001, p. 169). Knowledge as a thing made is honored by noncompliant learning—but only to the extent that it gives itself up to being remade to suit the here and now.

This means that the work of pedagogy is to tear teachers and students away from the curriculum's static content-objects of mourning, and challenge their loyalties to knowledge-objects (those ways of knowing that were created elsewhere at another time) so that they might be remade, and made responsive to contemporary conditions. Allegiance to theories or knowledge already arrived at runs the risk, Winnicott warns us, of "becoming a compliant act, of pre-empting the personal and the unexpected" (PHILLIPS, 1988, p. 54).

Pedagogy takes place at the turbulent point of matter crossing into mind, experience into knowledge, stability into potential. This the risk-filled time and space of pedagogy. And this is why pedagogical designs must address us to and from pedagogy's own limits. A pedagogical design must present us with the irritation of the limits of our—and education's—knowledge.

WHAT TO DO?

Enhance, engage, trigger, increase slippage to a point of productive tension—not to destabilize, but to set free effects produced under and beyond the radar of systemic conditions (this is the set-up).

Work for ever-expanding vocabularies and repertoires of pedagogical effects rather than “tuned sets” of strategies. Design pedagogical set-ups for the day after tomorrow rather than for permanent projections of an ideal future.

Foster and allow for constellations of pedagogical set-ups and take-ups that can be inhabited outside the payoff of a programmed for or pre-accounted for education.

Work with the fact that something doesn’t seem to fit. Work with a confused awareness that this misfit may be productive by causing concerns and problems.

Talk about formats and effects in such a way that they don’t cohere into a program because it’s not a question of appropriate or acceptable or productive formats.

Keep asking: what formats are worth inhabiting under which terms and how might that inhabitation possibly play out? (SCHMITZ, 2007, p. 144-7)

Schmitz argues that there is potential evolutionary advantage to taking actions such as these. They set us up to deeply inhabit the complexities and potentialities of pedagogy. They set pedagogy up to become a more sophisticated conceptual machinery for analysis and diagnosis of the present (p. 146). They also afford a more effective grasp of the fact that what is most real is the brute materiality of an external world that cannot be mastered. And such actions engender a parkour-like ability to navigate within, across, against, and in-accord-with a world that will always breach what we think we know.

Perhaps this gives us a way to grasp the pedagogical value of learning through digital media. As Emergent phenomena, digital media have outrun the grasp of all sorts of already-arrived-at-knowledge. Digital media present us with the irritation of the limits of our own—and education’s—knowing. We don’t quite know what to make of digital media as teachers. And that is their power and potential for us as educators. Digital media are making something (else) of us as much—if not more—than we are making of them. The

challenge is not to make products for digital media learning. The challenge is to make digital media learning products pedagogically (AGUIRRE, 2007, p. 185). The challenge is to make visible and palpable where a pedagogical project meets and aggravates our current limits of thinking and knowing.

As a condition of contemporary life, digital media bring us to the limits of what we think we know. And that is a perfect place to site projects of pedagogical design.

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