

Behind Every Silver Lining . . . The Other Side of Student Centeredness

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A very wise man (I believe it was on “Hee Haw”) once said: “Behind every silver lining . . . there’s a big, black cloud.” What follows is a critique of “putting the student first,” from someone who passionately believes in putting the student first. Every student is a child of God, and is therefore of an importance transcending political, socioeconomic, and philosophic concerns. Nevertheless, I must also remember the Scriptures’ strictures against those who miseducate children: millstones tied around necks, plague and pestilence, the ground opening beneath them, and national catastrophe are very vivid images. Since the Book of Job challenges simplistic deuteronomic theology (good people always get good things, and vice versa), we do not need to assume evil intentions on the part of anybody. Most teachers and professors of education are good people trying to do good things. For the purposes of this article, bad people and bad ideas are of little concern; let’s consider the dangers of good ideas done poorly. That, of course, happens all the time in schooling, and putting the student first is not immune.

Part of the problem lies in a very understandable misunderstanding of Socratic teaching. It is not synonymous with “open-ended” learning. Although there are many things we will never understand fully and are always open for exploration—the arts, π , and theology, to name a few—to assume that everything is incomprehensible insults humanity. While open-mindedness is a virtue, open-endedness suggests serious digestive problems. If one reads Plato carefully, one finds that seldom does Socrates ask a question when he doesn’t know what the answer will be. Yes,

Socrates was a guide, but hardly on the side . . . in fact, he was usually in somebody’s face!

Another difficulty can arise from a misunderstanding of democracy. When we think of ancient Greece, we think vaguely of the birthplace of democracy, and somehow many of us connect that with individualism. However, that is contrary to the classical spirit—even of Athens in its heyday. The Greek word for “individual” is *idiotes*—idiot—someone who lives in his own little world. Aristotle bluntly remarks that the self-sufficient man [*sic*] is either a god or a beast.¹ As perhaps the noblest example of the Greek ethos, Plutarch tells of a young warrior named Paedaretus, who didn’t make the final cut for the “Sacred Three Hundred,” Sparta’s elite special forces.² But unlike the other rejects, Paedaretus did not react with heartbreak or despair. Instead, he went home rejoicing that his city possessed 300 men better than himself! That is what citizenship was supposed to be: Not a neurotic self-importance or single-minded assertion of one’s rights, but a service of and delight in one’s fellows. The question isn’t really whether the children should come first—of course they should—but how may we best serve them? Ultimately, Socrates served best not by student activity, but by teacher example. The question isn’t really about the “sage on the stage,” versus the “guide on the side,” but about how may we help ourselves and our students be delightful people?

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Politics, socioeconomic conditions, and philosophical constraints make this sort of “formation” education difficult in the public schools. We talk sincerely about “whole-child education,” but by law we may not cultivate the spiritual. (Perhaps later generations will read about this and say: “Well, duuuuh!”) We strive for self-actualization, and argue about best practices for character education, but forget that they too have their limits. For example, Robert E. Lee was an extraordinarily admirable man, but a Lee victory would have meant continued slavery for an entire race . . . I beg your pardon, two races. Yes, our right-wing friends are right—character counts; but our leftist friends are also right—politics count too. We may find that the best public schools can do in character education will not turn psychopaths into saints. That is a job for conversion, therapy, or both. Hence, whole-child, student-centered education may not be doable in the public schools. However, we can avoid wholesale student-centered miseducation. There are at least six ways child-centered learning can be miseducative.

Student-centered schooling can be profoundly undemocratic, if it puts the interests of the kid first to the neglect of the interests of the people—the 250 million or so voters, taxpayers, parents, et cetera, who are also legitimate stakeholders in education. Public schools are just that—public—owned by the people, not just by pupils and professionals. To put the momentary interests and whims of a child above society’s ongoing needs and demands is short-sighted. To be sure, the long-term interests of the kid are different in many ways from those of society, but if they are incompatible, society usually must come first. Yes, there are occasions when society is wrong, but serious social problems require serious investigation and attention. Teacher resistance to the commonwealth should never be undertaken lightly. We may not like the standardized testosterone driving current policy, we may barely tolerate our states’ curricula, and we may not be overly fond of the folks downtown who are running things. If we are convinced they put the education of children seriously at risk, of course teachers have the responsibility to oppose those policies, and to oppose them with integrity. But to disregard society’s demands and then talk about “democratic classrooms” is not consistent and is unlikely to do the kid much good, either.

On the other hand, student-centered learning can be terribly unkind, if it means silencing the teacher’s voice. Why on earth would we want to? “Teacher-talk” is not a dirty word. On the contrary, there is a much-needed beauty in the elder sharing knowledge and skills with the younger. Any version of “humanistic education” that devalues the teacher can hardly be humane at all. Most teachers are living worthwhile lives and gaining worthwhile learning. For the teacher not to share that learning whenever it is curriculum-appropriate is misguided, and a misguided guide on the side is not likely to be going on the right road! The sage on the stage can be remarkably constructive, even if he or she is not “fun.” One stuffy old sage, Jonathan Witherspoon, had a most remarkable success rate: He taught one U.S. president, one vice president, three Supreme Court justices, twenty-one U.S. senators, twenty-nine U.S. congressmen, and fifty-six state legislators.⁴ More recently, Jaime Escalante and Marva Collins have been high-profile “authoritarian” instructors with inspiring successes. But those were “superteachers,” who turned their students into disciples, and we just do not have 2.7 million “superteachers” . . . yet.

But there is certainly a major problem with teacher talk when it is done poorly. In any graduate class full of practicing teachers, I’ll get only one or two hands raised when I ask who among them has ever been taught how to lecture. I’m not blaming education professors for teaching student-centered activity techniques; I’m all for it. But I am worried about what we’re not doing. It is easy for professors to forget that sometimes curricular constraints make lecture necessary. The tenth-grade world history teacher is supposed to teach 150 kids the history of the world in 180 hours. To do a halfway coherent job, the teacher will use more lecture than even the most classically oriented would like. This is not so much a methods problem, or even a personnel problem (“Yo, coach!”), as it is a curriculum problem. They and their colleagues in other content-rich fields will lecture, so let’s teach them how to lecture well. It is obtuse to deny children the creative power of the spoken word. It is wrong to withhold the redeeming power of the spoken word. And it is tragedy to still the beauty of the spoken word. In neglecting the rhetorical preparation of teachers, are we short-changing the development of students’ listening? Whatever they are to do in life, listening skills will be essential. If they have nothing worth listening



to in class, why would they learn to listen at all? And then we wonder why they seem to live in a world of attention deficit disorder and moral autism, and then we wonder why we are always having to come up with new and exotic methods of classroom discipline!

Student-centeredness can be awfully unimaginative, if we are so interested in letting the kid “be what he or she is” that we don’t aim for what the kid could be or should be. The student’s “authenticity” and mediocrity are, alas, not mutually exclusive, so authenticity—at least as it is commonly conceptualized—should not be a decisive value. History reminds us that aristocracies, “high culture,” and “great-man” scholarship hold serious dangers that we forget at our peril. But in the era of insipid bureaucracies, Beavis and Butthead, and dumbed-down curricula, those concerns may be less pressing. C. S. Lewis puts it nicely:

For every one pupil who needs to be guarded from a weak excess of sensibility there are three who need to be awak-

ened from the slumber of cold vulgarity. The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts.⁵

The misunderstanding of developmentalism that would simply treat students “as they are” only arrests development. A survey by Public Agenda found a strong dissatisfaction among high schoolers with what they see as an intellectually insulting version of child-centeredness.⁶ They want more involved (over two-thirds), more demanding (81 percent) teachers who can also make the learning fun (78 percent), and who are excited about their subjects (71 percent).

To treat young adults as children is just unwise, and the sillinesses we teacher educators sometimes impose on highly motivated college students can be intolerable. Yes, they should be taught age-appropriate ways to teach children, but they, too, deserve to be taught in age-appropriate ways.

Student-centered learning can also be unwise if it devalues the parents. True, there are plenty of

dysfunctional families out there. But to assume that parents and guardians are ignorant or brutal is simply arrogant. As politically exploited as the concept is, a cavalier dismissal of “family values” in favor of educational bandwagons is the mistake of either a new teacher or of an old professor! There is very little evidence that the parents or the public want the children to be running things. In fact, history and decades of *Phi Delta Kappan* surveys (September issues) showing concern about discipline indicate that parents generally regard the more permissive versions of student-centeredness as akin to letting the lunatics run the asylum.⁷

Student-centered learning can be unwise if our promotion of critical thinking undermines respectful living. Respect for parents, for other adults, and for one another all go hand in hand. Of course we should teach the kid to think well, and not to follow every pronouncement of authority nor every appeal to sentiment. But reason and venom have very little in common. An ultracritical theory that assumes sordid motives of “the other guy” isn’t critical at all; it is just prejudice in a new disguise.⁸ The “shout-down” method of argumentation is the standard technique not of the democrat, but of the demagogue. While no doubt there are intelligent objections to those versions of civility that suppress divergent opinion on behalf of dominant prejudice, there are also intelligent arguments for a convergent thinking that treats people and their ideas with respect until they prove themselves unrespectable.

Finally in this regard, we should ask ourselves if the romanticization of childhood we educators sometimes fall into only prolongs childishness.⁹

Historically, many societies inducted a child into adulthood sometime around puberty. We have prolonged childhood with a transitional period called adolescence—from the Greek *adolesko*, meaning “to chatter idly”—in which they are pretty much consigned to years of idle chatter punctuated by the occasional shattering of commandments. The complexity of modern society probably does require an extended period of semi-adulthood. But if child-centeredness makes immaturity a virtue, we’re in trouble.

Putting the children first may be unrealistic, because nobody who “counts” does. Until we understand that public schools are public, controlled by people whose self-interest may come before their altruism, we are doomed to futility. Educators need to find ways to appeal to those

interests of the policymakers that do not conflict with compassion for the kid. It has been done.

Lest we be too self-righteous, a little self-examination of our own motives isn’t a bad idea, either. As Becket says in “Murder in the Cathedral”: “The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason.”¹⁰ Do I rely primarily on lecture for the first third or so of my courses because I’m a show-off? Is my subsequent reliance on activities principally for the sake of convenience when the noninstructional duties start piling up?

Student-centered teaching can be unholy, if done with thoughtless enthusiasm. In the treatise “Norms and Nobility,” the classicist David Hicks remarks that the problem with student-centered learning is that it tends to produce a self-centered adult, which is the very opposite of an educated person.¹¹ The “self-esteem curriculum” has much potential for danger if it is not paralleled by an intelligent application of authority and humility. The danger of the immature being indulged by the indolent has unsettling implications for civilization. Erasmus reminds us of the inanity of what many consider self-esteem:

Self praise is ridiculous. If you flatter yourself for some inconsequential thing, you are foolish; if for some wicked thing, you are mad. And if you praise yourself for a good thing, you are ungrateful.¹²

But teacher-centeredness can do precisely the same thing. The sort of pride that can arise from either student-centered or teacher-centered schooling is incompatible with spiritual growth within the Christian tradition (believe me!), and although we do not have a legal mandate to promote spiritual development, we do have a legal mandate not to hinder it.

So what suggestions come out of all this? Perhaps we need just a bit less progress, and a little bit more renaissance. Bobby Kennedy’s famous quote “Some people see things that are and ask, ‘Why?’ I dream things that never were, and ask, ‘Why not?’” was cribbed from a George Bernard Shaw play, “Back to Methuselah.”¹³ It was said by the serpent to Eve. This is not to say that we should naively promote a return to some mythical golden age. Rather, it is to say that perhaps we should regard the contemporary, reform, and innovation with the same critical eye with which we have regarded the canon, tradition, and renovation. The teachers do: over and over again

I hear from practicing teachers how fed up they are with all these wonderful ideas we professors come up with, which invariably only add to the teachers' burdens. Most learner-centered innovations really are good ideas, but they are often time-intensive, both for teacher mastery and for student accomplishment. Surveys showing average teacher work weeks of forty-six hours include the substantial numbers of mediocre teachers who do nothing after the last bell.¹⁴ Most good teachers are desperately overloaded.¹⁵ There are some things schools just cannot do well, and everything is one of them.

Perhaps instead of coming up with more good ideas, we professors should study ways of cutting back teachers' workloads, and returning schools to what they were originally intended to be: places of leisure (*skhole* = leisure) for the education of the free. As it is, very few people in America are less free than students and teachers.

Student-centered learning is not only vulnerable to the contagion of innovation; it can also suffer from a pestilential presentism. We find in reading the greats in educational history that there are very few good things that are new. You're against corporal punishment? So was Erasmus, who did admit that some children, like cattle, can only learn by the rod. But like cattle, he said, they do not belong in schools; they belong in fields. Let's put them there.¹⁶ Do we think we've discovered something with multiple intelligence research and brain-based learning? It is firmly based in the supposedly "discredited" faculty psychology of the late 1800s.¹⁷ Interdisciplinary learning? Read Plato's curriculum. Affective education? Read Richard of St. Victor's *Benjamin Minor*. Character education? Read Irving Bunim's marvelous commentary on rabbinical teaching in *Ethics from Sinai*. Constructivism? Read St. Augustine's *De doctrina Christiani*, three sections of which were on the interpretation of learning, and only one on its transmission.¹⁸ Former *American Scholar* editor Jacques Barzun once said that most of America's education problems would solve themselves if we just left teachers alone during the school year, and made them read books in the summer.¹⁹ Given that according to at least one survey, teachers average reading only three books per year, two of which are popular fiction, that might be a pretty good idea.²⁰ If the teachers aren't reading, why should we be surprised if the students aren't?

Perhaps we can use a little less discord and a little more harmony. Twenty to thirty-five voices all doing different things at the same time is seldom beautiful. Exactly what is so great about diversity???? Like freedom, in and of itself diversity is values-neutral: both can be used for nine hideous ends just as easily as they can for lovely ones. I, for one, am heartily bored with teaching tolerance. I'd much rather teach charity (I Cor. 13). Yes, differences should be honored when they are compatible with just and agreeable ends. And even when the people are the most together, rest assured there will always be enough disputes to keep the professors gainfully employed. But when the "politics of recognition" make justice and community impossible, diversity is no better than perversity.²¹

Finally, as Neil Postman suggests, perhaps we should worry less about the center of education, and more about the end (*telos*) toward which we headed." Until we have some reasonable level of consensus about our goals for education, improvements in pedagogy will simply be better ways of controlling kids on behalf of whomever really comes first. But if we do earnestly search our past, and look more for what we have in common in the present, we may very well find that we all are headed toward the same end. We have no need for false dichotomies like "student-centered versus teacher-centered" and "constructivism versus behaviorism." We do have, an urgent need for a catholic education, in the original sense: universal, inclusive, balanced, charitable, and with a common end, one that is, perhaps, lined with gold. The younger among us may run headlong toward it with more urgency, while the older perhaps blunder along with twinges of conscience, but the point is, sages and guides and disciples and learners can be on the same road, heading in the same direction, together. And that is something beautiful.

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