

EDUCATION AND DIALOGUE.

F. Emery July 1988

The paper on "Educational Paradigms" ended with a comparison of the possible differences in educational practice that might follow from the alternative paradigms.

In this note I wish to consider the idea that each paradigm realizes its possibilities through the kind of dialogue between teacher and pupil that it dictates.

I will assume that dialogue is essential to the educational process. We may need to reconsider this decision.

For effective (democratic) dialogue to occur between parties A and B there are four conditions that have to be met :-

- a. the situation in which they confront each other must have the character, for both of them, of being an objectively ordered field open to both,
- b. their mutual confrontation must attest to their basic psychological similarity,
- c. their inter-action leads to a mutually shared field. The relation changes from the inter-action, A B, to the transaction of A(B) B(A). In the latter case each acts so as not just to signal their intention but their intention with respect to the other, and their mutual relation. When an acid attacks a metal surface no such complication is involved.
- d. as a mutually shared field emerges each becomes more open with respect to the other, i.e., more trusting and able to accept that the actions of the other might genuinely be aimed at mutual benefit or even be altruistic.

These conditions have only to be spelt out in this fashion to realize that the traditional relation of teacher to pupil makes no effort to establish such conditions. On the contrary, the tradition attempts to establish that :-

- a. the pupil begins as a tabula rasa with respect to learned teacher. The beginning pupils must be made to realize that the 'knowledge' they bring with them is hearsay, old folks tales and the like. They must first learn to rigorously put that sort of knowledge out of their minds, or risk being shamed or punished. True knowledge can only be built on foundations of true knowledge. The learning situation is taken, as a matter of fact, to be NOT an objectively ordered field open to the understanding of both. There is the subjectively ordered mind of the teacher that is open to the pupil only to the extent that the teacher is willing and able to make it so; and the pupil able and willing to make entry.
- b. The teacher will allow for similarities of gender, ethnicity, social status and the like. But that is hardly enough. The basic similarity required for dialogue in the

learning situation is recognized only in those pupils who prove able and willing to enter the ordered subjective world of the teacher.

c. the relationship that is expected to arise from interaction under these conditions is not a 'mutually shared psychological field'. That is neither expected nor socially desired. What is expected is that the pupil accepts the psychological field of his teacher as his own. A continuing asymmetrical relation is expected to emerge and persist between the pupil (ex-pupil) and his 'alma mater', his professor and his teachers. Any such system produces over time a hierarchy of statuses rather than an expanding field of mutually shared understandings.

d. In the development of an asymmetrical relation of this kind the expected, and desired, outcome is not mutual trust but reciprocated favouritism and devotion (subservience) and loyalty.

I suggest that the traditional paradigm of education dictates this as the only reliable way to diffuse learning, without corrupting the body of accumulated knowledge upon which further advancement of knowledge is critically dependent.

In effect the traditional paradigm denies any necessary role for dialogue in any form of mass education. It does not deny a useful role for dialogue in the education of the minority that meet condition b (above). This is the minority that provides the recruits for the hierarchy of those who are at one and the same time the diffusers of knowledge and the guardians of the accumulated knowledge.

It is commonsense that one can learn from experience and one can learn from others by talking to them about their experiences. Traditional education is something else again. There is no requirement that the teacher communicates anything about his or her own experience. A teacher's own experience must be subordinated to the requirements of the teaching role.

Communicating in the teachers role is about the one-way transmission of knowledge and not at all about dialogue. The knowledge that the teacher is transmitting is not open to discussion, at least, not between teacher and pupil.

In the traditional model the educational process starts from the existence of a storehouse of knowledge that is physically located in bodies of recorded symbols. That storehouse is tended by scholars who beaver away at removing inconsistencies and researchers seeking to add to the trove.

The teacher is one who has earned access to some part of the trove and learned to learn those particular contents. The teacher does not just learn the contents to which access has been gained. The teacher must learn that any such learning is invalid unless it goes along with learning the limits beyond which this learning cannot be

assumed to go. The permissible limits are those dictated by the knowledge store and are in no ways those that might be suggested by experience.