

Four Wrong Steps for Curriculum?

I am grateful to the editor for inviting me to "develop a short rebuttal" to the reply to my earlier article. The reply is considerably longer than my original article, and if I were to try to take it point by point, we might see exponential growth. The editor's admonition to keep it short encourages me to try to deal with a few major points in detail and make some general comments about the rest.

A preliminary note: the article was written to be read at a session of the 1983 CSSE conference. It was designed to be a stimulant to discussion and I was allotted fifteen minutes for the presentation. (I ran over by a few minutes - a unique occurrence at a CSSE session.) In the circumstances it would have been extravagantly ambitious to think one might present a tight and compellingly argued destruction of two of the major programs of research in education. The paper was intended as an outline sketch of some grounds on which one might be reasonably skeptical about the ambitions, promises, and claims of these two research programs. The respondent might well not be expected to have connected the Editorial of the issue with my article. The editor referred to the "comic spirit" evident in a number of the papers. When I wrote my paper I knew that the session would be attended by a number of my psychologist-of-education and philosopher-of-education colleagues. Phrases such as "pseudo-scientific and pseudo-philosophical mumbo-jumbo," which have apparently irritated the respondent, were actually intended, and read, in a lighter vein than the respondent has taken them. Clearly, when the past editor of the McGill Journal asked if he could publish the paper, I should have revised it to avoid having it misconstrued as so grimly aggressive. I am sorry to have neglected this, and I must accept responsibility for the respondent's misreading of the tone of the piece, and perhaps also the unfortunate tone of his reply, (though all that business about "prongs" might have provided some clue to intended levity).

The procedure the respondent adopts is not to deal directly with my reasons why we might be skeptical about the claims that "analytic philosophy of education" and "scientific psychology of education" will provide knowledge of value to education, but rather to infer from scattered comments, or from his own imagination, what alternative proposals I want to put in their place, and then to demolish these alternatives. This is an aggressive strategy whose success requires that one gets the alternative proposals clear in one's sights and neatly clobbers

them. The respondent is I think admirably successful at clobbering a whole series of proposals, few of which I can recognize as mine.

The weakness of his strategy in this case is that I nowhere propose an alternative. My article is an exercise in skepticism. This has left the respondent to infer what I must have in mind as alternatives to the programs I express skepticism about. Perhaps unfortunately he is confident that these alternatives are obvious. Let us consider his major inference, and most general error. From a number of my comments he infers that clearly I am proposing "some autonomous discipline of 'education'." Much is then made throughout the response that I fail to produce such a beast. It is hardly surprising that I fail, as I have no idea what a "discipline" of education might look like. Nor do I anywhere propose such a thing. What I do suggest throughout is that we can distinguish educational questions from psychological questions or philosophical questions. The respondent may think that this commits me to a belief in an autonomous discipline of education, which supplies the autonomous methods that allow us to answer these distinct questions. What is unclear to me is how far the respondent is arguing that one can approach educational questions only through philosophy, psychology, etc.

Let me briefly outline my present, insecurely-held, view: Education is one of those areas of practical activity, like politics, whose concern is with how best to live. For abbreviation's sake, we might use Richard Rorty's distinction between the pursuit of wisdom and the pursuit of certainty. We have some more or less refined methodologies for the pursuit of certainty, but there are important areas in human life, such as education and politics, in which certainty about any significant aspect of them - at least given the present condition of our methodologies - is impossible. The apparent security of the knowledge attained by our methodologies has encouraged us to apply them to questions which they are unsuited to deal with. To those committed to a methodology, and impressed with their success at securing knowledge, the Rortyesque/Wittgensteinian line seems like nothing but a return to the arbitrary, irrelevant, sterile, prescriptivism which our methodologies have carried us beyond. It is this assumption that we have no reasonable alternatives to the methodologies devised to attain certainty that it seems to me reasonable to be skeptical about. At a purely pragmatic level, the fruits of these research programs hardly support the aggressive claims of their proponents.

Now my view - even if spelled out at length - may well be confused and indeed nonsense. It is not, however, the view attributed to me by the respondent. A considerable part of his paper is given over to showing that, "Professor Egan nowhere produces his autonomous discipline of 'education'." The respondent is successful in this, but the success cannot be accounted much

of an achievement in the circumstances.

I will consider two other issues: romance, and the neatly dismissive argument that I use the process criteria of developmental psychology to undermine philosophical structures of knowledge, and the content criteria of the latter to undermine the former.

The strategy of inferring from scattered comments what must be my positive proposal and then demolishing that, is again evident in the discussion of Romance. An oddity of this is that I cite Whitehead's and G.R. Elton's use of the term, but very quickly the respondent confects for me, *inter alia*, an argument that "historical consciousness can be explained by . . . the stages of Romance and precision." This is somewhat alarming as I have a recent article "Development in Education" in the **Journal of Philosophy of Education** arguing the inadequacies of Whitehead's "romance" and "precision" stages. For Whitehead they are simple conversion of the Hegelian dialectic into more appropriate educational terms than "thesis" and "antithesis."

G.R. Elton has argued that one of the constituents of a sophisticated historical consciousness is a sense of Romance, which he then elaborates in ways that do little strain to the usual range of meanings of the term. He then makes the argument that we can better educate children to a sophisticated historical consciousness by focusing on the stimulation of this and some other constituents of historical consciousness in sequence, rather than trying gradually to stimulate them all together. This pedagogical recommendation is supported by a range of empirical observations about the kinds of engagements and uses of knowledge that seem common at particular ages. And he concludes with a prescription for teaching in such a way as to stimulate the particular constituents in a particular sequence. I chose the category of Romance because both he and Whitehead use it, and I have discussed it elsewhere as well.

The difficulty in the respondent's discussion is that he is concerned to demolish what might be my positive proposal, and knocks down a number of positions I might be holding. The point of my discussion was not to make any positive proposal - (on this matter my proposal can be found in **Educational Development**, New York: Oxford University Press, 1979) - but to consider what kind of category Romance is in claims like Elton's and Whitehead's, to suggest that is not an arbitrary and meaningless concept, and to argue that the two research programs are unable to deal with such a category because of methodological restrictions.

Now one might respond that Elton is engaging in philosophical analysis of history in articulating Romance as a constituent of historical consciousness and in somewhat

unsystematic psychology in supporting with empirical observations his description and his association of Romance with a particular age range. What we see here, then, is not some autonomous discipline of education at work, but merely a cooperation of philosophy and psychology. Before accepting the educational prescription that Elton concludes with, we would no doubt like to further consider his analysis philosophically and test his empirical claims. (Though even if we conclude he does a poor job, we cannot just assert that it is an arbitrary prescription.) This I take it is the respondent's argument. It is somewhat confused by his assumption that I am defining "historical consciousness" as the product of romance and precision, and his energetic destruction of my position if I am. Neither Elton, Whitehead, nor I hold this position.

Later the respondent asks whether to consider education is "to consider psychology and the structures of knowledge jointly, or is it to consider something ontologically distinct?" A point of my paper was indeed to raise this question, and to suggest that considering the two areas jointly is not a straightforward matter. Through all the beating down of confected positions, the respondent does not seem to have got much grasp on the purpose for discussing Romance. One can interpret Elton's claim as simply a product of psychology and philosophy working jointly to reach an educational conclusion. The point of the example was to raise what seem real problems if we assume that this is what is going on. The respondent becomes enmeshed in showing that what he takes to be my position - that it is ontologically distinct - is wrong, and that all kinds of other positions he imagines I might hold are wrong too. My position, in fact, is that I simply do not know. I thought my example, and its "in some sense" and "kind of" qualifiers, at least made clear that I did not opt for the ontologically distinct position **simpliciter**, and raised serious problems for the belief that such educational prescriptions can be a product of the joint use of philosophical analysis and psychological research. The respondent seems to see no problem here. Perhaps there is a simple solution that I just have not grasped, and perhaps it is that simplicity that has made the respondent miss the point of my example.

The respondent neatly dismisses my skeptical reflections on the two separate areas by arguing that I use the process criteria of psychology against philosophy and the content criteria of the latter against the former. This success, it seems to me, is achieved by ignoring a half of my argument on the one side and mangling beyond recognition my argument on the other.

I make two arguments against "the structures of knowledge" program. First, that it has failed in its claim that it would produce better ways of sequencing knowledge in the curriculum and, second, the Hirstian claim to have established width and depth criteria for a curriculum which claims to educate, at least

in the traditional liberal sense. The respondent, in making the charge that I apply the process criteria of psychology considers only the first argument. He suggests that here I have made an empty point because no one has argued that the structures of knowledge inquiry should yield such sequencing principles. "But who has said these things?" he asks; answering that Hirst has not. Indeed, Hirst's claim is the second one. The first claim is made by many North American "structure of knowledge" proponents, beginning with Bruner's **Process of Education**, including contributors to Phenix's **Curriculum Crossroads**, and many other "structure of knowledge" collections from the sixties. I report these views in my article and criticize them. It seems doubly odd of the respondent to correct me by citing Hirst at me. If no-one has said these things, who was Hirst correcting when he was at pains to point out that such confusions resulted from confounding the "logical grammar" with the "logical sequence" of a discipline?

My second argument, against Hirst's "forms of knowledge" thesis, may be quite improper in any number of ways. It is not, however, an argument that uses the process criteria of psychology to undermine Hirst's thesis. The neatness of the dismissal can be sustained by the simple, but hardly acceptable, expedient of ignoring this argument.

I fear that this reply to the reply is becoming something other than short. The respondent seems to be on much shakier territory dealing with Piaget and the stages of development arguments. Sorting out the arguments here would require more space than editorial hospitality could allow. There are some quite peculiar gross confusions - peculiar given the confident dismissiveness of the response. The "less extreme" view on the existence of a natural substratum of cognitive developments, for example, "can be dismissed immediately on the grounds of analyticity." The respondent's easy success here is won by referring back to transforming appetites and behaviours which we share with animals when I am, I thought clearly, referring to things like concrete operations. My argument about the analytic and the arbitrary seems to have been hopelessly mangled. On this and other arguments in this section I have had a more detailed say elsewhere. Anyone who cares how I develop the sketches in the article can look in **Education and Psychology: Plato, Piaget, and Scientific Psychology** (New York: Teachers College Press, 1983).

It is hard to resist expressing regret that a small part of the energy the respondent has used in trying to absolutely destroy confected arguments did not go into getting my arguments clear first. Much of the responsibility is mine, of course. The paper is not a carefully argued piece, but simply a sketch of some grounds for skepticism about two prominent research programs.