THREE PERSONAL CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH CONTINGENT PRAGMATISM

JAMES G. HENDERSON, Roosevelt University

Imagine faculty in a preservice teacher-education program introducing students to collaborative reflective practice. Or imagine a principal introducing secondary school teachers to collegial supervision. These leadership attempts may be philosophically associated with our legacy of pragmatism.¹ One currently important pragmatic philosopher is Rorty. He characterizes pragmatism as follows:

[There is] a fundamental choice which confronts the reflective mind: that between accepting the contingent character of starting-points, and attempting to evade this contingency. To accept the contingency of starting-points is to accept our inheritance from, and our conversation with, our fellow-humans... Our identification with our community—our society, our political tradition, our intellectual heritage—is heightened when we see this community as ours rather than nature's, shaped rather than found, one among many which men have made. In the end, the pragmatists tell us, what matters is our loyalty to other human beings, clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right.²

Rorty has two points. When we reflect, we must either accept or avoid the contingent nature of our thoughts. If we accept this contingency, we confront an important principle. Our reflections are best guided by reciprocal communication with other human beings, both past and present. This principle conveys an image of a reflectivity grounded in humility and open to continuing discourse. Such reflectivity does not deny the potential value of personal intuition or insight (whatever its source); it simply rejects the conceit

¹Specific philosophical projects labeled as pragmatic trace back to the late 19th century. Familiar examples of such projects are the works of Charles S. Peirce, William James, and most important, John Dewey. For a brief, readable introduction to selected pragmatic projects relevant to educational work, see Ernest E. Bayles, Pragmatism in Education (New York: Harper and Row, 1966). For a historically significant pragmatic essay, see John Dewey, Experience and Education (New York: Macmillan, 1938). For a current and sophisticated interpretation of the pragmatic spirit, see Sandra B. Rosenthal, Speculative Pragmatism (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986).

²Richard Rorty, Consequences of Pragmatism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 166.

To return to the practical world of curriculum and supervision, an invitation for collaboration or collegiality may be grounded in the principle of \textit{reciprocal reflectivity}.\footnote{As Rorty notes, however, this will not be the case if the invitation is based on some sort of positivistic assertion—"I have the answer for collaboration and collegiality."} Preservice students and experienced teachers receiving such an invitation, whether they are mildly interested in or enthusiastically receptive to the specific inducement, are, in effect, being asked to embrace this principle. But embracing this principle is personally challenging in at least three interrelated ways:

- In terms of my personal past, have I developed a sense of empowerment? Do I function with a sense of personal agency when I face a problem?
- In terms of the present, can I practice critical skepticism? Can I identify and analyze discourse that inhibits or destroys community dialogue and thoughtful action?
- When engaging in personal reflectivity and community dialogue, how fluid can I be with my interpretations? After taking a position on a relevant matter, am I willing to reposition myself when appropriate?

Before analyzing these three categories of questions, a brief description of the pragmatic vision of contingent reflective practice will establish the context for the discussion.

\section*{RECIPROCAL REFLECTIVE PRACTICE}

Reflective practice in education is a complex professional activity that has received different interpretations, one of the best-known is used for this discussion.\footnote{For comprehensive analyses of differing perspectives on reflective practice, see Alan R. Tom, "Inquiring into Inquiry-Oriented Teacher Education," \textit{Journal of Teacher Education} 36 (September–October 1985): 35–44. Also, see Kenneth M. Ziechner, "Preparing Reflective Teachers. An Overview of Instructional Strategies Which Have Been Employed in Preservice Teacher Education," \textit{International Journal of Educational Research} 11 (No. 5, 1987): 565–575.} Dewey states that reflection is the "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends."\footnote{Richard Rorty, \textit{Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 357–394.} Dewey thus identifies two significant reflective concerns. First, practitioners can reflect by asking why they do what they do. Stated more formally, they can analyze...
the premises underlying their actions." Stated more autobiographically, they can consider the personal resources they bring to the teaching-learning process. Second, practitioners can reflect on the consequences of their work in the light of various overlapping contexts in which their teaching is embedded. Their immediate day-to-day teaching-learning situation is both shaped by local, state, and federal policy mandates that validate and limit professional autonomy and by a host of historically situated personal, social, economic, and political contexts. The committed, thoughtful teacher experiences reflective practice as a highly complex and personally demanding undertaking. A community of these teachers would respect each individual's reflections, as well as understand the value of reciprocal communication as a means to help one another sustain high levels of reflectivity and, thus, to ensure that no "reflective stone" was left unturned.

Reciprocal reflectivity must be clearly distinguished from domineering dialogue. The former is grounded in the spirit of equality in which the participants have "the goal ... of an agreement that terminates in the intersubjective mutuality of reciprocal understanding, shared knowledge, mutual trust, and accord with one another." The Platonic dialogues can be interpreted as exemplifying a contrast to this sense of mutual communication. In many dialogues, though Socrates challenges his students, he assumes the role of a mentor who has the correct interpretation. This type of dogmatic hermeneutic positioning, prevalent in the idealist philosophical tradition that begins with Plato and that Habermas critiques throughout his own work, is inimical to reciprocity. When communicating in a spirit of mutuality, prac-

---


"Like all great literature, Plato's works are amenable to a variety of interpretations. Although the interpretation I adopt here is that the views of Socrates dominate the Platonic dialogues, the dialogues can also be interpreted as exemplifying the principle of reciprocal reflectivity. For an articulation of this position, see Leonard Grob, "Leadership: The Socratic Model," in Leadership Multidisciplinary Perspectives, ed Barbara Kellerman (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984), pp 263-280.

"For further discussion, see Richard Bernstein, ed., Habermas and Modernity (Cambridge, MA. MIT Press, 1985)"
titioners may try to convince one another of the value of their interpretations but never from the perspective that they have interpretive truth on their side.

The *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* is replete with papers critiquing current manifestations of domineering dialogue and providing models of curricular and supervisory reciprocity. For example, Goodman astutely analyzes the subtle forms of technical and paternalistic domination in elementary education and then offers strategies of resistance. Holland carefully distinguishes between the domineering supervisory dialogue historically associated with positivistic inquiry and exemplars of reciprocal supervisory dialogue inspired by the critical-hermeneutic inquiry tradition. Finally, Reid briefly explores implications for institutional change inherent in his advocacy of a deliberative approach to curriculum.

Communities of reflective practitioners who attempt to practice curricular and supervisory reciprocity, though not widespread, do exist in American education. One noteworthy example is the Angler Elementary School, as portrayed by Barth. Under the leadership of Barth, this elementary school established sophisticated student placement and evaluation policies that demand high levels of reflective practice sustained by reciprocal dialogue between the principal, the school staff, and the parents. For example, instead of receiving periodic grades on their child's progress, parents participate each winter and spring in a half-hour conference with their child's teacher. To prepare for these conferences, teachers write comprehensive individual student evaluations that the principal reviews before each conference is scheduled. In addition, teachers have certain discretionary powers over curricular and budgetary matters, and they exercise these powers by following procedures of public, professional justification. For example, teachers can decide to teach individually or in teams of two in either single- or mixed-age classrooms (though a mixed-age classroom cannot contain more than three grades), and they must defend these decisions with the principal, as well as the parents.

The Angler School does not, by any means, fully exemplify the principle of reflective reciprocity. Eight years after publishing *Run School Run*, Barth frankly acknowledges that he was not as reciprocal as he could have been in his curriculum and supervisory dialogue. His acknowledgment simply underscores the challenging nature of forms of pragmatism grounded in a sense of contingency.

---

THE QUESTION OF PERSONAL EMPOWERMENT

Participating in a reflective work environment based on reciprocity can challenge our sense of personal empowerment. For example, workers functioning with a sense of self-efficacy would feel that through commitment and hard work they can bring about meaningful changes. However, this sense is not easily acquired and is an outgrowth of prior social learning. The possibility of inappropriate social learning raises the question of false consciousness. According to Lather, "False consciousness is the denial of how our commonsense ways of looking at the world are permeated with meanings that sustain our disempowerment." Thus, if I believe that I must passively accept my problems because of my early childhood experiences, I may need to examine this belief as part of my reflective practice. Or, because of prior modeling by significant others, if I believe that people are more likely to manipulate one another than to participate in reciprocal communication, then I may also need to examine this belief. If I am not willing to examine these "commonsense" beliefs, my participation in reciprocal, reflective dialogue may be limited (and probably defensive.)

Greene provides another example of false consciousness—and one that is currently prevalent in the United States. She distinguishes between "negative" and "positive" freedom. Negative freedom is the position that one has "the right not to be interfered with or coerced or compelled to do what . . . [one does] not choose to do." As Greene so insightfully argues, individuals who adamantly oppose any form of oppression may lack a conception of positive freedom—the recognition of the rights and responsibilities associated with self-directed, community-oriented activity. These people may need to examine their beliefs on personal liberty before they can fully participate in a work environment based on reflective reciprocity.

THE QUESTION OF CRITICAL SKEPTICISM

The second self-insight problem is the capacity for critical skepticism. A community of reflective practitioners must be careful not to unwittingly include disruptive discourse in its dialogues. Some discourses rationalize domination.
Racist and sexist discourses serve this ideological function by overtly and covertly justifying the status and power of one group of individuals over another. These discourses justify domineering dialogue and therefore inhibit possibilities for reciprocal communication. Since these discourses prevail in the United States, they must be quickly identified and thoughtfully rejected by a community of reflective practitioners. Individuals who have difficulty with critical work may need to examine the reasons for their incapacity.

More subtle, and thus perhaps more pernicious to the principle of reflective reciprocity, are reified discourses. These discourses are overly literal linguistic constructions of important matters. For example, many practitioners might interpret the *Taxonomy of Cognitive Objectives* as helpful or, at least, as benign. Without a prior critical treatment of this model, however, two significant abuses are likely to occur. First, based on the taxonomy's distinctions, practitioners might be encouraged to simplistically embrace an *overdetermined cognitivism*, which equates prescribed, hierarchical cognitive operations with sophisticated thought. This equation needs careful examination because of its potentially inhibiting effects on actualizing one's complete repertoire of reflective capacities. Second, the use of the taxonomy can also inhibit community interaction by substituting formalistic discourse for sensitive dialogue on the perceived spirit of an educational matter. Only a vigilant critical analysis of the taxonomy would help practitioners maintain the perspective that the power of reflection and dialogue is located within themselves, not within a reified discourse—no matter how clearly articulated and coherent that discourse might be. If they have trouble with this critical analysis, they may need to examine the nature of their difficulties.

**THE QUESTION OF DISCURSIVE FLUIDITY**

The principle of reflective reciprocity also raises the problem of repositioning—our ability to consider a plurality of discourses on a particular subject

---


as a potential source of relevant positions. In Kristeva’s terminology, active participation in a co-equal, reflective community challenges us to become a “subject-in-process . . . [which is] a pluralized subject, that occupies, not a place of enunciation, but permutable, multiple, and mobil places.” Combining a historical perspective with Kristeva’s post-structuralist account of discursive mobility, Alcoff argues for a “positionality within a context whereby one takes up a position within a moving historical context and . . . [is] able to choose what . . . [to] make of this position and how . . . [to] alter this context.”

Similarly acknowledging the historical context but also heeding each individual’s autobiographical situatedness, Grumet argues for an awareness in which the “‘I’ is the location of a stream of possibilities.” This historical-autobiographical awareness requires us to “reclaim what was once ours but [because of disempowering childhood experiences] was returned to us bonded to language, culture, gender, and patriarchy.” Such authoritarian, paternalistic bondings, when critically analyzed, lead us back into a more playful sense of meaning. Derrida writes:

Knowledge is not a systematic tracking down of truth that is hidden but may be found. It is rather the field of freplay, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble.

A reciprocal reflective practice potentially questions our capacity for this playful orientation, as well as what may be preventing us from such discursive, rhetorically aware fluidity.

REFLECTIVE RECIPROCITY AND SELF-INSIGHT

This brief analytical treatment points to an obvious conclusion. It is not enough to advocate curricular and supervisory programs based on a contingent pragmatism without also acknowledging the potential personal challenges that accompany such advocacies. If those receiving the inducement

---


Ibid., p. 125.


For an insightful discussion of playfulness and discursive fluidity, see Drew Hyland, The Quest/on of Play (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984).
have a sense of disempowerment, have trouble with critical analysis, or have problems with discursive repositioning, they may need to examine these limitations as part of their participation. In fact, to ask them to engage in a form of reciprocal reflectivity without simultaneously helping them with potential personal challenges may be naive, as well as arbitrarily idealistic and dogmatic.

AN EXAMPLE OF SELF-INSIGHT FACILITATED

An example of how to make self-insight easier will help make this discussion more concrete. Students in a preservice secondary education program at Roosevelt University receive a 20-week introduction to a reflective community guided by the principle of reciprocal communication. They learn how to inquire into 12 specific recommendations on good teaching. For example, they learn an eight-step lesson-plan protocol and consider the utility of the procedure in the light of past experience, present purpose, and imaginative possibility. They also reflect on this protocol in terms of four historically significant discourses on good teaching. As part of their inquiry work, they also engage in several types of peer collaboration.

Two insight-oriented activities are included in this 20-week curriculum. The first activity is an imaginative exercise and is therefore designed to be less threatening; the second activity, because it is more personally confrontational, is voluntary. Students first reflect on several student learning problems that raise issues of professional empowerment, critical skepticism, and repositioning. These problems have actually occurred at local high schools in the Chicago metropolitan area. For example, students discuss an unmotivated adolescent who is in the lowest of a three-track system at a parochial high school. How should this adolescent’s problem be framed? Should the school’s tracking system be examined? Could teachers in a parochial high school consider alternative and more democratic curriculum designs? These types of questions are discussed from two contrasting perspectives. How would a teacher exhibiting a less pragmatic orientation respond? (This individual feels disempowered, can’t be critically skeptical, and is interpretively unyielding.) How would a teacher with a more pragmatic orientation respond? After comparing the two teachers, the students consider how they might encourage the less pragmatic teacher to be more reciprocally reflective.


John R. Martins, who is on the Counseling and Human Services faculty at Roosevelt University, helped design these two activities. For an example of his work, see John R. Martins and Mary W. Lasseigne, “Peer Counseling in Undergraduate Teacher Education,” Journal of Teacher Education 30 (September–October 1979): 24–25.
The second activity is a voluntary component of the students' cooperative clinical supervision. The supervisory approach has six steps:

1. Establish a reciprocal problem-solving relationship with your partner
2. Create individual, mutually acceptable supervisory contracts, which clarify the next four steps.
3. Hold a pre-observation conference.
4. Formally observe your partner’s peer teaching.
5. Hold a post-observation conference.
6. Complete formative and summative assessments.

As part of their formative assessment, students are asked to evaluate both themselves and their partner on the topics of empowerment, critical skepticism, and repositioning. As a guide to this reflective dialogue, they are asked to consider the following questions:

- When you and your partner identified areas for professional improvement, did you feel empowered to make the necessary changes? Or did you feel helpless when confronted by specific instructional critiques?
- Did you offer and receive instructional feedback that did not inhibit mutual problem solving and reciprocal dialogue? Or did you encounter problems of mistrust?
- Could you openly discuss diverse instructional points of view? Or, for whatever reasons, was your supervisory dialogue constrained?

These three questions are introduced as suggestions, not as prescriptions, for reflective dialogue. Empowerment, critical skepticism, and repositioning are not treated as precise, operational terms but rather as broad, normative concepts to be interpreted within the intrapersonal and interpersonal contexts of each supervisory relationship. Also, self-examination is distinguished from personal rumination. The students are told that the purpose of the exercise is to encourage self-insight, not narcissistic absorption.

CONCLUSION

These two reflective exercises are only examples of how the personal challenges associated with a Rortyan contingent pragmatism can be frankly

---

For purposes of instructional feedback, the instructor reviews contracts before the students implement them.

acknowledged. Because of the complexity of personality development, facilitating self-insight is a difficult undertaking. Many different approaches may be necessary to help individuals examine issues of empowerment, critical skepticism, and repositioning in their personal and professional lives. Whatever the approaches used, the guiding principle would be to help them recognize the self-insight challenges associated with curriculum and supervisory designs based on a sense of contingency. These designs come with a personal question. Do I have the requisite sense of empowerment, desire for reciprocity, and discursive fluidity?

JAMES G. HENDERSON is Associate Professor, College of Education, Roosevelt University, 430 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL 60605.


Drawing on recent advances in both philosophy and physics, Oliver and Gershman lay out the key characteristics of a “cosmological curriculum” that moves beyond the current segmented, fractured, partitioned one to one that “directs us both to feel and critically examine the depth and breadth of human experience”—to look at this experience in qualitative, not just quantitative terms. A cosmological curriculum emphasizes the lived reality of those undergoing the curriculum process and explores human relationships, the nature of the good society, and such existential questions as Who am I? Oliver and Gershman challenge us to think of curriculum not just in terms of material to be controlled but in terms of lives to be led.

—William E Doll, Jr.


In 14 chapters, Pajak addresses the diversity of roles and organizational patterns used in districts for the central office position held by those in charge of overseeing curriculum and instruction. Based on data collected from interviews, case studies, and surveys, Pajak’s text presents ideas for improving curriculum and instruction from successful district level practitioners who share their experiences and perceptions.

—Brenda Benson-Burrell