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BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

THE NECESSITY OF SEEING RELATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN TEACHING AND LEARNING*

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Carr, D. (2000). *Professionalism and Ethics in Teaching*. London: Routledge. 304 pages.

Sidorkin, A. M. (2002). *Learning Relations: Impure Education, Deschooled Schools, and Dialogue With Evil*. New York: Peter Lang. 212 pages. DOI: 10.1177/0022487105279944

Teacher educators work with prospective and practicing teachers focusing on what it means to learn and teach. They confront what constitutes learning experiences in classrooms, pursuing the consequences for the nature of learners, learning, teachers, and teaching. Increasingly, in my work as a teacher educator I document consequences to the elemental nature of learning and teaching, such as neglecting the ethical realm of teaching and learning, the impossibility of genuine concerted action on the parts of teachers and students, the disregard for development of

self-understanding, and the curtailment of contextually sensitive teaching and learning practices (Macintyre Latta, 2004). Such consequences surface in the research literature as impoverished themes undermining teaching and learning. These themes come alive in the relational spaces between self, other(s), and subject matter. Perhaps educators and others are underestimating consequences to the nature of learning and learners through ignoring significances found within such relational complexities.

A growing number of educational writers and thinkers insist that gaining access to this relational complexity is integral to accounting for teaching and learning (see also Cochran-Smith, 2001; Dewey, 1904; Field & Macintyre Latta, 2001; Gallego, Hollingsworth, & Whitenack, 2001; Grundy, 1989; Hostetler, 2002; Noddings, 1986; Raider-Roth, 2002, Thayer-Bacon, 1995). In fact, Gallego et al. (2001) conclude, “Without opportunities to develop the capacity for relational knowing, teachers and teacher educators will never be able to teach their students to develop such capacities” (p. 261). It is with this very intent of enabling teachers and students to develop such capacities that I find hope in two books confronting the relational complexity inherent within teaching and learning. Alexander Sidorkin’s book *Learning Relations: Impure Education, Deschooled Schools, and Dialogue With Evil* is grounded in learning being a function of relation, insisting educators must “pay close attention to it” (p. 2). David Carr’s book *Professionalism and Ethics in Teaching* fleshes out the complexity of professional knowledge arguing that it ought to be grounded in “evaluative deliberation” requiring attention to a multiplicity of interacting relationships concerned with “pursuit of the good” (p. 83).

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Both Sidorkin and Carr analyze the role and relevancy of theory in teaching and learning, revealing the complexity of relationships between student or teacher inner processes and responsive behaviors. Both authors respect the power of teachers to significantly affect learning and propose to work with them on the basis of the ensuing relational complexities encountered. Both books confront the pervasive discourse dominating what counts as accountability in teaching and learning and, as such, present a compelling argument, indeed, a philosophical and pragmatic necessity, for relational accountability. Sidorkin's account foregrounds relations as the determining ground for all learning, whereas Carr's account examines the impact of relations between educational theory, teaching practice, and professional conduct. Sidorkin develops a pedagogy of relation through a critique of education that draws attention to what teaching for relational complexities orients teaching and learning away from and, thus, toward. The following consequences surface in my mind, manifesting images of a forgetfulness and deformation of the nature of teaching and learning:

Regulated learning: I see students' and teachers' questions being ignored, dismissed, and perhaps, not even given a space to form, in order to conform and perform regulated ways of thinking and acting in classrooms. Sidorkin builds a case suggesting that education marketed as a way to achieve a purer, more easily replicated production and form (in standards for quality control) and consumption (in vocational portability) itself has become consumptive, appropriating all other forms of knowledge and human action into a single standardized conception of accountability. The effect of this is massive; all things including teaching, learning, and curriculum are challenged to reveal themselves only as

forms of something already regulated and secured for unencumbered exchange and consumption. "Education is but an enterprise dedicated to the production of useless things" (p. 12).

Disconnected learning: I see students and teachers distancing themselves from their schoolwork, choosing to simply go through the motions, play the game, or rather, become ambivalent, rarely, if ever, feeling connected to subject matter, resisting the game. In this way, curriculum exists in forms wholly divorced from time, place, and people, self-contained entities that can be captured and represented in pre-specified outcomes, competencies, and indicators. The knowledge students and teachers are asked to see is free from all living referents, fixed and preformed. If situated knowledge is ignored, hidden from view is a living "relational field" (pp. 124-125) that one can immerse in, identify with, and develop a feel for.

Self-destructive learning: I see students and teachers being labeled as unsuccessful and as disturbances because they do not find any aspect of themselves in their schoolwork or curricular practices, rarely locating space for their ideas, stripping confidence in themselves as learners and thinkers. "Learning is to be somehow mutated into learning how not to be" (p. 49).

Monolithic learning: I see what is missing, what is lost, by ignoring the particularities of individuals and situations in teaching and learning. "Relation in general is possible only in the presence of difference. Totally identical entities cannot relate to each other. Relations result from plurality, from tension born of difference. Therefore, any relation between or among human individuals will include certain non-coincidence of their reflections of the relation" (p. 98). Monological authority resulting in monolithic learning needs to be replaced with "polyphony, the principle of engaged co-existence of multiple yet unmerged voices" (p. 145).

Orienting teaching and learning toward oneness discounts multiplicity. Orienting teaching and learning purposefully toward preconceived representations of learning, following set orders, sequences, and hierarchies resulting in generic (useless) products, consequently discounts fluid, purposeful learning encounters between students and teachers, which would result in divergent learning processes and products. Orienting teaching and learning toward prefigured ways of being and doing masks differences in thinking and ways of working, thwarting differences as catalysts in coming to know self and other(s). I ask the question, What might be gained through seeing relational complexities as springboards for teaching and learning? But it is exactly this subservient role that Sidorkin challenges the reader to rethink:

The old paradigm of educational theory frames educational processes in terms of doing. Teaching as well as learning is considered to be doing something. Human relations are obviously very important for any student of education, and yet relations have always served as a background, as a context of the theoretical picture of education. . . . Once we can perceive relations as a text and actions as a context, we can see a very different picture of education. What we do with students is not that important; what sort of relations we build with and among them becomes very important. (p. 85)

And, so, Sidorkin brings me to the realization that if relation is the aim of education, it is relational complexities that must be seen as primary in education, as fundamental to being human, offering a relational ground for teaching and learning (p. 86). Thus, Sidorkin's pedagogy of relations opens into an ethical space demanding a capacity to

read relationships, to reflect on these cases, to talk and write about relationships. The key skill here is the ability to reconstruct the other voice. A teacher must develop this ability to hear what has not been said, to formulate what his students are not able to articulate, to engage in a dialogue when the other party may not be willing or ready to engage. The ability to understand human relations relies heavily on the heightened ability to hear and respond without preconceived notions of truth. (p. 100)

In other words, what we do as educators needs to arise from the sorts of relations we build, nurture, and sustain. Sidorkin is adamant that this does not mean devaluing action but that no action can be taken without consideration to the relational dimensions (p. 197). He further explains that the ethical space that relational complexities permeate requires acceptance of Bakhtin's (1984) idea of polyphony:

The principle of engaged co-existence of multiple yet unmerged voices. Polyphony is a fascinating fusion of ethical and esthetical considerations applied to human relations. (p. 145)

The problem of educational authority is negotiated through polyphony. And polyphony seems to require a capacity to see potential in other(s), ideas, and situations. It is this sense of seeing that Carr's book helps me flesh out in a "fusion of ethical and esthetical considerations" (Sidorkin, p. 145). Carr, focusing in particular on the professional educator's roles and responsibilities within this ethical relational space, deliberately takes up the ethical space into which Sidorkin's pedagogy of relations opens.

Carr grounds professional knowledge in evaluative deliberation, circumventing the dualism of theory and practice and attending to the "articulation and expression of

professional educational values” infused “with theory or techniques only in so far as these inform or are informed by practical wisdom” (p. 83). Implicit within his conception of educational deliberation is an understanding of deliberation as discernment, inherently and necessarily relational, concomitantly seeing, thinking, doing, and acting responsibly. Decisions are derived from within situations demanding receptivity to sensory qualities and relations between self and other on an ongoing basis. It asks us to take an interest in that which appears. Such interested-ness is about being in the middle of things—the space found between self and other derived from within the act of participation. Carr draws on Aristotle’s (1925) interpretation of the participatory act as “discernment of the mean.” And Carr’s proposed necessary Aristotelian “eye” focuses on the individual and the concrete particularities requiring an engaged knowledge (Sidorkin’s infusion of ethical and esthetical considerations) intimate to the action itself. This is the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis*, understood as critical judgments exercised within the very activity rather than a higher knowledge imposed on the situation. *Phronesis*’s concern with particularities demands attunement to process, generating a movement “to secure the good” (p. 100). *Phronesis* is at the heart of Carr’s discussion. He fleshes out *phronesis* as highly receptive with a capacity to acknowledge past and present and to inform meaningfully the future. *Phronesis* shapes and guides through “evaluative choice and moral conduct” (p. 101) taking its bearings from the particularities of the relational complexities coming together. The bearings lie in constantly questioning what we see and think about the world as it opens up. *Phronesis* seems akin to polyphony, valu-

ing multiple voices, valuing communal participation, transforming self and other, and being always in the making.

Both Sidorkin and Carr give expression to the fluid nature, the flux, integral within relational complexities. Perhaps, the role and place of seeing this flux as necessary in self and other(s) is what has been repeatedly misinterpreted and misunderstood. I am reminded that Dewey (1929), in fact, claims this, stating that it is the model of spectatorship that is problematic, thinking of seeing after the model of a spectator viewing a finished picture rather than after the artist producing the picture. Spectatorship is contemplative. Acting is operative. And as Sidorkin and Carr convey, seeing is about inhering in the action, concomitantly seeing and acting.

The necessary seeing/*phronesis*/polyphony assumes a concern with what it is that ought to be done. It assumes a mode or way of being in the world, entailing pursuit of the good. And such a search for the good is always in immediate relationship to the whole, arising from learning experience and returning to learning experience. It is not about gazing out on an external world applying meaning but rather about meaning in the making deemed fitting to situations on an ongoing basis; a fit that values action rather than outcome.

Attending to relational complexities demands seeing that is derived from a nontechnicist deliberation, which Carr identifies as the crux of “much confusion in educational debate.” Seeing taken up in a technicist manner ignores the particularities of context and follows procedures to a pregiven end. Thus, technicist seeing avoids questions about the good, reducing action to predefined behavior,

substituting finite goals for transformational thinking, and replacing judgment with predetermined rules and skills. Nontechnicist seeing considers what is at stake in a situation. This is not a generalizable imposed wisdom but instead specific to a moment, unanticipated. And, most important, it furthers the movement of thought in self and other(s). Such seeing with potential entails Gadamer's (1960/1992, p. 322) insistence that

although it is necessary to see what a situation is asking of us, this seeing does not mean that we perceive in the situation what is visible as such, but that we learn to see it as the situation of action and hence in the light of what is right.

Thus, relational complexities acknowledge the givenness of situated knowledge assuming a learner be brought into being, concomitantly bringing learning into being too. Relational complexities generate the movement of thought as teachers and students constantly confront the world as it opens up. Connecting students, teachers, and subject matter is what teaching and learning relationally entails. The vitality inherent within relational complexities reorients teaching and learning appropriately for learning's sake. In this way, students and teachers continually revise and enlarge understandings, assuming personal investment, seeking transformation, attending to particularities, relying on collective action concomitantly acknowledging reciprocity between self and other, and understanding the pervading ethical responsibility of all judgments. Acting wisely and searching for an ongoing human good ought to matter in teaching and learning. So, as a teacher educator, I encourage teachers and students to seek out relational complexities, but I fear we are dangerously close to losing

sight of their place and role in accounting for teaching and learning. Sidorkin and Carr help me to name this fear, to confront this fear, and most important, to insist that the ground relational complexities open onto must account for teaching and learning. Relational accountability asks all of us to see fundamentally what is at stake in teaching and learning, encountering ourselves and our relations to others and otherness. This conditional, indeterminate ground is central to being in the world and, as Sidorkin argues, ought to be implicit within learning and, as Carr argues, ought to be implicit within teaching.

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