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Biography and the Curriculum

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Biography and the Curriculum

Abstract

In recent years many critics have written of the pervasive dehumanization and possible rehumanization of education. Plighting their troth to the autonomy and integrity of the human person, these commentators scour the educational landscape in search of policies and practices that depersonalize. They have often attacked teaching methods and the social and institutional situation in which teaching is undertaken; a few errant knights have even assailed the enterprise of teaching itself. Less often has curriculum content been questioned, and when it has been, the critics were usually concerned about "irrelevance." There is, however, another way in which the curriculum is obviously and literally depersonalized - yet it has, curiously, avoided all the attacks of all recent humanizers I know of. Therefore, I propose to take up sword and join the fray (without judging the claims of the other participants). The object of my criticism is the place of biography in the curriculum, the role now given to the study of another person's life. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

education, teaching methods, biography, dehumanization of education

Disciplines

Curriculum and Instruction | Curriculum and Social Inquiry | Philosophy | Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education

EDITORIAL

BIOGRAPHY AND THE CURRICULUM

In recent years many critics have written of the pervasive dehumanization and possible rehumanization of education. Plighting their troth to the autonomy and integrity of the human person, these commentators scour the educational landscape in search of policies and practices that depersonalize. They have often attacked teaching methods and the social and institutional situation in which teaching is undertaken; a few errant knights have even assailed the enterprise of teaching itself. Less often has curriculum content been questioned, and when it has been, the critics were usually concerned about "irrelevance." There is, however, another way in which the curriculum is obviously and literally depersonalized--yet it has, curiously, avoided all the attacks of all recent humanizers I know of. Therefore, I propose to take up sword and join the fray (without judging the claims of the other participants). The object of my criticism is the place of biography in the curriculum, the role now given to the study of another person's life.

For focus, consider just the undergraduate liberal arts curriculum: what place is given to biographical study? A classical biographical study is usually included in the supplementary reading list for each course; seldom is it required reading. If time permits, the instructor may present biographical materials as "background" for the course content; but knowledge of this background is seldom worthy of evaluation. Biographical anecdotes save many a dull lecture by providing comic relief; but beyond this, they are ornamental. In short, biography is relegated to that category we condescendingly (!) call "human interest."

What this conveys is that we liberal arts teachers are involved in our disciplines, our systems of inquiry, and that our only intellectual interest in people is as contributors-to-a-discipline, as inventors or discoverers, as makers-of-instructive-mistakes, and occasionally as illustrative case studies. Darwin's theories are immensely important; Darwin, the person, is inconsequential. It seems that without a fateful laboratory accident, Madame Curie's life would have been of little worth. The curriculum is thus literally depersonalized: it does not include the study of persons. Only names and contributions are recorded, like a list of credits at the start of a film.

Two disciplines do employ biography more extensively than I have allowed. Biographies and autobiographies are often read in classes

on literature; however, they are read "qua" literature, for their literary qualities and not for an understanding of the life of the subject. Literary biographies are employed to help illuminate literary products; historians similarly use biographical materials to aid in the interpretation of historical events. These are both utilizations of biography as a tool of critical scholarship, and in both cases the primary object of study is never the life itself, but is instead that artifact or event which a study of the life may help scholars understand.

Some researchers recoil at even this restricted use of biography. In the extreme, they argue that all biographical matters are logically irrelevant to disciplinary or even interdisciplinary investigations; it is, consequently, illegitimate to try to explain a concept or theory by reference to the life of the person who developed it. Such a reference is a kind of "argumentum ad hominem," a fallacy of irrelevance. When one cuts through the confusions and complexities of this view, several points await an accounting: (1) It is surely impossible to disentangle completely one's works and days. (2) The study of a person's life often induces a feeling of deeper comprehension of his works. The philosopher who examines the life of William James or Friedrich Nietzsche feels he has augmented his appreciation of their writings. And often this new-found understanding leads to more than forgiveness. (3) It becomes important to determine whether one can rightfully permit the use of biography to aid in "understanding" an intellectual product while denying the use of biography to aid in "evaluating" that product.

Whatever one determines to be the proper role of biography vis-a-vis the disciplines, the question remains: are there other reasons for studying biography? Is there educational value to be gained from the examination of the life of another person--regardless of the contribution such an examination might make to other kinds of inquiry? To be concrete, suppose one was to introduce a course on Descartes, say--not on his philosophy per se, not on Cartesian thought, but on the particular life-cycle of the man, Rene Descartes. What one would study is the career of a certain Frenchman who engaged in a variety of activities; he was a man who served as a soldier, developed analytic geometry, wrote philosophy, studied optics and meteorology, experimented with the wheelchair, wrote on music, and enjoyed overheated rooms. The challenge is to see all of these as both expressions and determinants of a personality.

A battery of courses like this would, I think, yield several positive effects. It would give students a variety of human models to analyze;

it would permit a vicarious experience of a variety of life-styles. It would introduce the perspective of a lifetime and encourage the attempt to think of one's life as a whole. A wide variety of people could be studied, including those who made no major contribution to any discipline or historical event; in fact, the study of a life of failure and despair can be instructive. Biographically oriented courses are, in a sense, naturally interdisciplinary, both in approach and content. They permit students with a diversity of competences and of different levels of academic sophistication to approach the same subject matter together. All of these effects may be called humanizing.

Admittedly there are pitfalls. Such courses could become overly didactic; only "virtuous" persons might be deemed worthy of study; biography could become a secular hagiography. But the problem of selection and the related danger of indoctrination are general problems connected with any curriculum. Secondly, there is no guarantee that such courses would not be dehumanizing in the ways attacked by other critics. Thirdly, and most crucially, the rationale for my suggested study of biography needs to be informed by an adequate philosophy of biography. And that brings me to my final point.

Biography has blossomed as a literary form during this century. From Carl Sandburg to Erik Erikson to Paul M. Kendall, first-rate scholars have produced evocative works in quantity previously unheard of and with modes of analysis hitherto unavailable. In addition, wholly new types of biographical source materials have come into existence; audio-visual records have largely replaced diaries and letters and have added new dimensions and problems to the task of the biographer. Nevertheless, the philosophy of biography languishes in an undeveloped state. Is biography a discipline? What, precisely, is its subject matter? What is its structure, its aims, its methods, its principles? Is it a social science? There should be no doubt that our notions about biography and its place in the curriculum are badly in need of cleaning and reappraisal. I believe a well developed philosophy of biography will reveal that the study of the lives of other human beings is worthy of a larger place in our educational framework.

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