

Self and Others: Relational Pedagogy for Critical Pupil Engagement

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Abstract.

A discussion of how humans have conceptualised ideas of self and relationships with others, applying this to teaching and learning in school. Relational pedagogy puts understanding of relationships first, highlighting ethics and social justice, and applies to the whole curriculum. Pupil engagement is viewed as the development of Self, in cognitively and socially critical directions. This is the full version of the paper discussed at this meeting. Part 2 has been developed further in the light of this and other discussions.

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In my everyday work on the educational potential of positive relationships, both between adults and children, and in adult interactions, issues of what we mean by appropriate ideas about 'self' constantly emerge. We know intuitively that we are unique beings with feelings of identity and for the most part we wish to foster our own progress through life. Throughout our lives we come into contact with 'others', some friendly and some not, some regarded as significant and some not. How we organise our relationships with 'others' is the basis of politics; the *quality* of it is the territory of ethics, virtue and morality.

Thus the human race has a concept of self, a self image, a self concept, and aspire to something we call self esteem. Religions claim for humans a special spiritual status over brute beasts; early evolutionist thought placed humankind (and often white male humankind) as the apex of evolution. Yet humans have only been around for a few million years, have only been literate for four thousand, and have only become scientific/industrial for 300. The prognosis for the future health of the species, given biological and nuclear weaponry, is not good.

Our past has been littered with tyranny, war, ethnic tensions and 'cleansings', persecution and genocide. 'What it means to be human', a favourite phrase of a Methodist colleague I once worked with, was intended in a positive way, about human potential for good; the history of humanity actually shows the opposite. Human beings are clever killers taking pleasure from killing for its own sake, whereas animals tend to kill to eat for survival when hungry. Human society and community has therefore put in checks and balances to prevent anarchy. 'Other' people are divided into 'us' and 'them', amity and enmity, caste and outcast. Power relationships and wars are waged by groups united by relatedness; to keep order law discourages individualism where this harms others. Morality is a mechanism for controlling passions and producing acceptable expected behaviour. It was

possible however to be considered moral and at the same time to keep slaves, to kill enemies, and to enhance profits at the expense of your workforce. The definition of 'acceptable' is changeable.

This is not to say I am a pessimist: this analysis is a call to action, demanding a praxis that is prepared to reflect on social justice in order to campaign for change. In this regard, I am influenced by critical analysis as developed by the Frankfurt School who used Hegel's dialectics, Marx's call for social action, and interdisciplinarity to reflect critically on the social context in which knowledge is constructed and claimed, and critical of claims to absolute knowledge and truth. After Marx, philosophy and theory must be channelled so that it is able to change the world, not just to describe it. Critical theory has been utilised more recently by such as Jurgen Habermas, Paulo Freire, Joe Kincheloe, and Shirley Sternberg. The Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm has recently written *How to Change the World* using the same tradition.

Today multiculturalism recognises plurality and demands respect for all; globalism requires that benefits to all the world wide are considered, so global solidarity replaces narrow national interest. The theory is easier than the practice: race, class and gender have become highly contested and debated aspects which cannot be considered as resolved. Some groups highly value their in-group status and fear eradication by assimilation. Extreme religion of all varieties continues to resist the multicultural project.

'Self and others' seems to be discussing the obvious, but it is not. I raise a few thoughts now for further thought, and survey some contributions of writers I have been concerned with recently.

Self.

Humans are conscious that we are ourselves and not someone else. Some forms of brain disorder may not function in this way, but in general we think we know who and what we are. We don't know whether animals have such a self-concept – how would we? Biologists are constantly revising their conclusions about animal communication. It may be that humans only humans have powers of reasoning.

However, how do we know that our mental picture accurate?

Constructivism argues that the human brain constructs its worldview on the basis of experience and knowledge. Educational psychologists such as Piaget, Bruner, and the Russian Vygotsky have been central to this. In psychology, George Kelly in the 1950s developed **Personal construct psychology** (PCP) exploring how we construct our self concept using detailed questioning of how people construct their personal understanding..

In Buddhism, the concept of **anatta**, 'not self' emphasises that our artificial ideas of self are part of the general 'suffering' or 'unsatisfactoriness' (dukkha). We have unhelpful expectations, and unrealistic ideas about our

lives. The answer is to see things as they really are, and try to see ourselves realistically. *Anatta* suggests that our self concept, and beliefs about the eternal self, is a delusion that we need to see through, a fiction which is part of the overarching 'problem'.

Though not a Buddhist, I find this an attractive analysis. The classic religious view is a romantic and somewhat mythological image of our selves existing before our lives, being born into this world, and on death leaving it for somewhere else. Evolution suggests that like ants and spiders, we are born through a wholly natural process, perpetuate our species, and then die. The only difference is that humans have language to think about this process and structure our thinking grammatically around the pronouns 'I', 'we', 'you' and 'he, she, it'. As individuals, we only experience being ourselves, and our ability to understand and empathise with others is limited. When the life of the physical body ends, consciousness ends and what we think of as ourselves is gone.

Comment:

- How people view themselves is a key element in educational success. Children are not born to fail (unless there are extreme medical issues, but here 'fail' is a relative term). Failure therefore comes later as a result of experience, perhaps at the hands of parents and family, and perhaps at school. John Holt argued in the 1960s that children are **taught to fail**, using his own experience as a teacher to illustrate demotivational practice. **Ivan Illich** argued that schools are about failure and we are better without them: he is best known for his work, *Deschooling Society*. His solution, networked expertise, is only now possible with the internet. Schools have to assess and rank students, which means in most cases demonstrating that they are not the top. Assessment means constantly criticising; although positive criticism is helpful, being critical might in many cases be demotivating. Many adults are damaged by their schooling, and have to overcome their resultant lack of confidence.
- **Self esteem** (and lack of it) is a mantra of educationalists. All problems are explained by its lack. Boost it up, they say, and you solve all issues. But what is it? It is an umbrella term that is opaque in its meaning, and is used in a confusing array of senses. Esteeming ourselves highly may be positive or negative, accurate or inaccurate, helpful or unhelpful. Hitler, Stalin and Mao presumably had high self esteem, and between them killed millions. How we relate to other people's feelings of esteem, selfishly or with respect, is also important. What we understand by self esteem could involve self-belief, self-confidence, resilience. These are clear and understandable, so it is better to use these terms. Linking them vaguely into something broader but vaguer called self-esteem is not useful.
- Work in education needs to undo the ravages of **inappropriate thinking about self**. This means to reject estimations of our abilities given to us by others, where these will form barriers to progress. More positively, this

needs to lead to the development of reflective and reflexive habits. It means replacing 'can't do' with **can do** assumptions and to tackle under-confidence and over-confidence. Maslow's model of self actualisation attempts to model this, taken further by Dana Zohar and Ian Marshall, as (a non-religious) spiritual intelligence and *Spiritual Quotient*.

- There is a relationship between 'self' and 'identity'. *Identity* suggests stereotypes or labels that help us define ourselves – nationhood, language, jobs, interest all suggest labels with which to define identity. Identities, on the other hand, are barriers to globalism. Nationhood for example, can block broader action. Religion can erect barriers to others. Neither have to do so, but often they do. Identity may have strong emotional ties, of belonging and solidarity, but this tends to focus on the in-group rather than the totality.
- There is a wider question of **the eternal self**, the soul, perpetuation after death and perhaps also before birth. Is the purpose of life to get future reward and avoid future punishment. Buddhism, and the Hindu Mahabharata, reject this. Heaven is an illusion, a delusion. What we mean by 'self' is a complex of emotions, assumptions, values and relationships that define our self consciousness. The self is who we think we are. For Buddhism, the various life forces that I am composed of live on after death but we do not have an individual soul which is reborn/reincarnated. This is not dissimilar to what Paul Tillich meant by existential '**depth**'. Martin Buber was similar, I relating to Thou (God) but only through my (I) relationships with my fellows (thou). I would go further. The body is a machine which will one day be switched off. Whatever programme it is running, whatever self definitions it has on file, will be closed, deleted. Full stop. We don't get a second chance.

Other.

The self exists in relation to others. The self is never an island, but is an actor in a process. The holocaust taught us that regard for the lives and dignity of others cannot be assumed. Hannah Arendt (1963,1971), speaking of the Nuremberg trials, used the term "**the banality of evil**", when evil, murder, cruelty becomes an everyday job. We saw this in Rwanda, genocide in cold blood with executioners bussed in. Stanley Milgram's electric shock experiments revealed that two thirds of subjects gave their experimental partners potentially fatal shocks (of course unknown to them these shocks were not real). Philip Zimbardo (the '**Lucifer Effect**') 'had similar results experimentally in his Harvard prison experiment. In fact the whole experiment has to be cut short as the gaolers were out of control. He compared this to Guantanamo Bay, concluding that the system was to fault, making otherwise decent people go along with diabolical deeds when these are presented as normal. The other third who did not respond in this way were described as 'heroic resisters' (that is, resisting peer pressure to harm others). It is hard to say whether the non-resisters can be described as innocent, or had personality defects, or whether they learnt something uncomfortable about themselves from this experience. They were simply doing as they were told by an authority figure.

The rise of existentialism, an introspective and novelistic turn in philosophy, had moralising responses in the 1950s through such writers as the Quaker John Macmurray, *The Self as Agent* and *Persons in Relation* (Gifford Lectures, Glasgow) who argued that all knowledge is for action; all action is for friendship. Self knowledge is revealed by one's actions. He was the philosophical mentor of Tony Blair.

Transaction Analysis (TA).

TA by Eric Berne provided a therapeutic solution to observations about human transactions. This can be simplified as:

There are three Ego states: Parent, Adult, Child.

These are modes, not age related so two adults could engage with each other in child to child mode. A transaction is a unit of interaction. Parent to Child is authoritative/ authoritarian, child to child is immature, adult to adult is mature. Every transaction can thus be codified. If one of you chided me petulantly (parent mode) and I cheeked you back (child mode), then we have a way of altering things by recognising this and each moving to adult mode. You could make a point rationally (adult mode) and I could answer seriously (adult mode). Things go wrong when inappropriate 2 way transactions take place. A teacher indulging in child to child arguments with children will fail. Equally a teacher who is able to talk to a 6 year old adult to adult is more likely to succeed.

Berne also spoke of having a **life script**). We may have to take up a new script if our usual one fails us. Like a B movie, our life might be bad because the script is awful and needs a make-over.

Berne also wrote *The Games People Play* and this leads us to **Erving Goffman**. For Goffman, life is (metaphorically) a bit like a theatre play. We play parts/roles – front of stage, backstage, depending on situation and mood. The theatre is a metaphor for life. Our relationships or interactions are often artificial; we role play according to a script.

He discussed:

The Production of Self

Presentation of self, demeanour, deference

Role distance

The Confined Self – prison

Territories of the self, mortified self, stigmatised self, recalcitrant self

Social Life – as drama, as ritual, as game

Frames, or the organisation of experience

Victor Turner viewed **social drama** as therapeutic (especially where supernatural forces were involved as in the tribal societies that he studied as anthropologist) and pointed to carnival as socially uplifting. Supernatural powers become translated to us today as psychological traumas or influences (**e.g. ancestors**). Terry Pratchett's children's story **Nation** expresses this

relationship between us and our past brilliantly, with his tribal hero extricating himself from traditional expectations, symbolised by the disembodied voices of the forefathers (and the almost silenced voices of the foremothers). Turner argued that social action can take away social tensions and pressures – since anyway, social tensions have to be attended to in case they create problems. His work linked this social comment with theatre performance, which he argued could similarly be life enhancing.

Vospitanie is the Russian term for 'personhood', assumed in Russian society and the core of the school curriculum (Popova and Bigger, forthcoming). The person is 'in community', 'in relation'. What we do as individuals has social implications. This had a certain function in soviet year, coming out of feudal assumptions, and is struggling to modify itself to a neo-capitalist situation, if that is what the contemporary Russian economy is.

We can ask the question, what is needed to turn a child or adult around from one track to another, one script to another. The answer will be something 'other worldly' (out of their normal experience, or 'more than' themselves, using William James' phrase). This pulls them short and drags them through a hedge backwards to face up to their sense of self and inappropriate life script. Could 'I' be different? Does it always have to be like this? I researched a programme here in Swindon trying to do exactly that. Called **Tranquillity Zone**, it is a form of contemplation guided by story and imagery, bringing participants to face up to whatever is going on in their lives. Later, discussion and activities asks reflective questions not dissimilar to TA, but based on a light-darkness polarity (positive-negative). We could take this back to **Kurt Lewin's push-pull factors**: what is holding you back? What do you need to do to help you go forward?

Implications.

There are practical implications for education and moral community. These are key challenges for the 21st century.

- There is a need in the curriculum for critical studies of self – a **reflective/reflexive curriculum** using the arts and humanities to enhance self understanding. We currently have an **instrumental** curriculum of maths, grammar and 'how to do' science. This has implications for the school curriculum.
- There is a need for critical studies of relationships locally and globally – equality issues, equity, distribution of wealth.
- The notion of 'person in global community' requires urgent attention. Paul Kurtz, in the Neo-Humanist Manifesto (online), notes on **equal dignity** "The challenge facing humankind is to recognize the basic ethical principle of planetary civilization-*that every person on the planet has equal dignity and value as a person*, and this transcends the limits of national, ethnic, religious, racial, or linguistic boundaries or identities".

- Children need new ways of looking at politics, society, education, the media. We need to educate children to be critics, asking socially critical questions.
- Children need to address questions of the individual in community. With Turner and Goffman, I would argue that drama is a powerful way of doing this, and the dramatic structure of everyday life is recognised.

Relational Pedagogy for Critical Engagement

This section explores one method of defining and developing curriculum and pedagogy through the lens of Self and Other. The English National Curriculum, established in the Education Reform Act of 1988, officially dictates what must be taught in schools (the curriculum) and new teachers are trained to 'deliver' it. There is an assumption underlying this that knowledge is uncontested, and selecting what to include is unproblematic. In both cases the opposite is true: what is now regarded as 'known' and 'true' will be tested, refined and replaced over time through a critical process; and the official selection of a normative canon of knowledge is the product of the winners over the losers. Before 1988, teachers were trained to select their own curriculum, albeit within guidelines. When done well, this resulted in creative curriculum planning, which is unfortunately no longer possible.

How things are taught (pedagogy) is less restricted and actually much more crucial. Two teachers can teach the same content, and whilst one inspires, the other demotivates. This therefore is a significant area of research when considering student learning and engagement. Pedagogy superficially can be viewed as active or passive, that is, either encouraging action and involvement, or just taking in what is given. In real life there may be a mixture, a balance of these, it is I believe a balance weighted strongly towards the active. We need however to conceptualise the process in more sophisticated ways, so I am here building on ideas of Self and Others to begin this discussion. There needs also to be a balance between self and others to avoid either self-centredness or self-denial. First I will deal with each in terms of pedagogy.

Self Learners, and groups of learners, are learning about themselves. They are influenced, for good or ill, by their definitions of self and their attitudes to it. Put simply, if they feel or assume they are inadequate, this may negatively affect their ability to learn. Their teachers (including nurturers) can either increase confidence or destroy it. Let us briefly model the kind of pedagogy that will destroy confidence: sarcasm belittles learners; learners are treated as objects, or "the class", rather than individuals; instructions rather than discussion dominate; anger and shouting is a control mechanism; faults and weakness are constantly pointed out; the learners are not listened to or allowed to influence their treatment; the teacher opinion is always regarded as true, learner opinions as immature. Without labouring the point,

the confidence-building school works towards the opposite of all these. The following may result:

- Confidence to experiment and explore
- Engagement, as personal interests develop
- Enthusiasm and motivation to learn as learners take more control over their learning
- Enjoyment, as learning ceases to be a chore
- Interest in life, as relevant learning offers deeper and wider perspectives
- Emotional understanding and increasing maturity, because they are themselves the subject of their learning
- Self-reflection on their own learning and progress, the beginning of reflective living

Others

Pedagogy which is 'others' focused emphasises cooperation, relationships, equity and fair play. This is a constant balance to development of self-concept as illustrated above. It emphasises discussion and dialogue with others that is 'open' – that is, that various points of view are made available, discussed through rational argument, and no one view is considered to have authoritative status. Collaboration is part of the process of co-constructing knowledge. Nevertheless there is room for amicable disagreement, and indeed this is encouraged, since new syntheses come from disagreement. Evaluating progress is viewed as a group activity. The individual recognizes their responsibility to the group, whether this be family, class, nation or species – i.e. locally and globally, so the end result is the active responsible citizen.

There is much more to be said about 'others'. Martin Buber, philosopher and theologian (died 1965), talked about *I and Thou*, the title of one of his influential books. *Thou* implies *ship* as opposed to *It* which suggests regard as object, non-human, non-significant. Theologically, after studying Hasidic Judaism, he took I-Thou as representing the worshipper and God, but relationships with other humans becomes a way that the divine encounter takes place. This promotes *intersubjectivity* as an aim of real dialogue, as opposed to other conversations which masquerade as dialogue but are essentially closed communications, parallel monologues, with no intention to learn from them.

Carl Rogers, the counsellor/psychotherapist, resisted therapies which objectified 'clients' and is remembered for 'person centred therapy', through which he influenced the whole of later psychotherapy. This addresses personal issues through discussion, believing that issues would be resolved by talking about them. Such 'talking therapies' are also referred to as 'phenomenological' (Moustakas, 1994). The therapist brackets away personal views, puts them aside, in order to deal objectively with the client's words and experiences. This does not assume however that the therapist has to believe, approve of, or learn from the client. Buber and Rogers met to have

a tape recorded public dialogue in 1957 about the possibility of public dialogue which changed them both (Cissna and Anderson, 2002).

Some writers emphasise 'other' as negative, a designation of people who are 'not us'.

Relational pedagogy.

My model for pedagogy balances the concerns for understanding of self, self motivation and self discipline on the one hand with the need to work with others, to develop positive relationships and to have the common good at heart.

Frank Margonis (1999) took the word 'relational' from Paulo Freire. Freire recognised that teachers and students had different narratives and had to enter into a new relationship in their pedagogical encounter, so that the voice of the student is encouraged, and the authoritarianism of the teacher (and the teaching materials) discouraged. Freire means simply that the teacher and students works together at learning, each respecting the other with love, trust and humility. Margonis actually complains that Freire himself depicts the students in derogatory ways, so this removal of arrogance is by no means easy to achieve.

Brownlee (2004), concerned with student teachers' attitudes to truth (i.e. epistemologies), based a relational model of teaching simply on respect for the pupil, use of their experiences, and commitment to constructivist learning. Three Australian senior teachers were dismayed that "cognitive learning is usually over-emphasised" using the term 'relational pedagogy to right the balance and view pupils as active partners in learning and knowledge creation (Boyd, MacNeal and Sullivan, 2006). Papatheodorou (2009) applied the term *relational pedagogy* to early years education. She notes that pedagogy implies a dialectical relationship between teacher and learner, representing a serious obligation to relatedness; and it involves true dialogue, in which the teacher learns as well as the pupils. She sees it as a worthy alternative and successor to current more transmissional approaches.

Critical Engagement.

The phrase 'pupil engagement' is used with various meanings: I intend by its use not the simplistic superficial versions of keeping the pupils busy, but pedagogy that stimulates both deep intellectual engagement and critical understanding. Achieving this will draw on contributions by both student and teacher, but it is the teacher who has particular responsibility to provide the most appropriate learning environment for pupils and students. Building positive working relations has the purpose of enabling pupils to become engaged without confrontation and in a climate of mutual respect. The term *engaged* points to the Self as involved in life, acting responsibly and with motivation. The pedagogy is active, engaging the learner to want to learn. To do this *critically* means that this engagement has to have sharp edges.

The term '*critical*' has various meanings. First, it is intellectually critical, accepting nothing on trust but testing and challenging claims to knowledge. The ability to be critical becomes the real aim of education, not to have uncritically memorised ambiguous or even outmoded information. Secondly, it implies social criticism. This draws on critical theory (originating with the Frankfurt School who opposed the Nazis and escaped to America) which has personal and social justice at its heart. It is critical of traditional assumptions, the old status quo of wealth, privilege and class. It raises consciousness of issues of voice, social justice, equity and honesty and regards pedagogy as a political act.

Critical pedagogy has been outlined and explored through many books by Peter McLaren Joe L Kincheloe, Shirley Steinberg, Henry Giroux and others. The influence of Paulo Freire is strong, standing for education being consciousness raising, political, relevant to experience and empowering. Freire's colleague Donaldo Macedo affirmed, in 'Reinserting Criticality into Critical Pedagogy' (in McLaren and Kincheloe, 2007: 392) the crucial need in America to teach children about social justice, freedom and democracy contesting "racism, sexism, class exploitation, and other dehumanising and exploitative social relations" (p.392), resisting the neo-liberal establishment claim that this is indoctrination.

He concludes the book (p.394): "Critical pedagogy is a state of becoming, a way of being in the world and with the world – a neverending process that involves struggle and pain but also hope and joy shaped and maintained by a humanising pedagogy that, according to Freire, "is a path through which men and women can become conscious about their presence in the world. The way they act and think when they develop all of their capacities, taking into consideration their needs, but also the needs and aspirations of others" .

Elizabeth Quintero, *Critical Pedagogy and Young Children's Worlds*, chapter 10 of the same volume, applies this to young children, who express themselves readily through art and story: "I define critical literacy, stemming from critical pedagogy, for all ages of learners as a process of constructing and critically using language (oral and written) as a means of expression, interpretation, and/or transformation of our lives and the lives of those around us" (p.202) .

In conclusion, we have described an education system that stimulates discussion, dialogue, the process of constructing new knowledge, experiment, learning from experience, in the context of learning to care both about the needs of others and about extending one's own understanding critically, creatively, empathetically and in collaboration with adults and fellow pupils. The Self therefore, to use John Macmurray's (1961) title, is "in relation", developing ideas with other people, becoming confident with other people, learning that other people have needs to, and that interest in others can be rewarding. With Paulo Freire we can expect this to be consciousness-raising and transformative. With constructivist pedagogy, we can aspire to a

next generation who will solve problems, reinterpret and expand evidence, and develop a society in which aspires to social justice and all this implies. This planning map (Figure 1) of how to study environmental education using Relational Pedagogy for Critical Pupil Engagement is intended to flesh out the curriculum potential. At the top, the curriculum area, with pointers to topics of active learning. At the bottom, the implications of the work for educational practice generally, with an emphasis on the philosophy of active learning. The west box focuses on what children learn about themselves, and the east box what they learn about and from others.

Figure 1.

Environmental Education

Learning from experience
 Nature, Growth
 Conservation
 Nurture
 Life, Biophilia
 Sustainability, Ecobalance
 Food
 Custodianship

Engagement (*myself* related)

Active learning
 Confidence, empowerment
 Interest, motivation
 Cognitive criticality
 Challenge
 Emotional connection
 Enthusiasm for learning
 Enjoyment
 Experimentation
 Experiencing success

Equity (*other* related)

Active group learning
 Relational pedagogy and curriculum
 Cooperation, dialogue, working together
 Critical of unfairness
 Respect for others
 Concern to help others
 Willing to think as a group.
 Active citizens

Education, Philosophy of

Deep learning
 Problem solving
 Criticality, cognitive and social
 Co-construction
 Questioning, self questioning
 Metalearning – how to learn
 Evaluation, Ethics, Equity

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