

Jack Whitehead

Producing a Humanistic Education Theory

Having spent six years teaching in London Comprehensive Schools and six years studying the ways in which University Academics think about education I have come to the conclusion that the dominant view of educational theory needs to be replaced by a humanistic alternative. At the present time the study of educational theory takes the form of an initiation in the disciplines of the philosophy, psychology and sociology of education. It does not begin from the assumption - which is I think where it should begin - that educational theory is the aggregate of the reasonable and testable explanations which educators give for their own educational practice.

As a Humanist I am predisposed to the view that we should credit individuals with the capacity to give reasonable explanations for their own behaviour including classroom behaviour. An educational theory produced in this way would be humanistic in the sense that it was made up of the explanations which individual human beings gave for their own practices. What I want to do is offer an explanation for my own practice to see if you think that such explanations could provide a basis for the production of a humanistic educational theory.

An Explanation For My Own Educational Practice

In the classroom with my pupils I found myself asking, "How do I improve this process of education here?". I videotaped myself as I attempted to answer my own question. The tapes enabled me to reflect on my activities and to see what I had been doing. I'd like you to look at my explanations to see if its content and form appears reasonable and if you think that it is testable in the way I suggest below.

1) I Experience a Problem Because of My Educational Values are Negated In My Practice.

I am assuming that part of our concern with humanistic psychology is due to the fact that in our everyday lives we experience the denial of some of the values on which we believe that a humanistic society must be based. I am also assuming that for the majority of us one of the basic relationships in which we experience this denial is at work.

In my teaching in comprehensive schools I have rarely been able to use my humanistic values in teaching. For example, in my science teaching I have

had great difficulty in establishing a system of learning in which my pupils could follow through the implications of their own imaginative phases of enquiry. I have also found myself in my class teaching denying my pupils the freedom to exercise their choice in the content of their studies as well as denying them the right to exercise some responsibility for their own learning. I have also failed to distribute my skills in a just way. What I mean by this is that in teaching the same thing to all my pupils at the same time I failed to respond to the different needs of some of my pupils.

2) I Imagine A Solution To My Problem

I think that I need some trolleys and trays and cabinets in the classroom. If I am following a certain theme on the combined sciences, then I would like to have in my classroom all the basic stuff necessary for maybe a month's work. There would be cards, workbooks, etc., and I could train the children to work through a basic core of work, get their own apparatus, start off their own experiments and work along their own lines of enquiry, when and where that came in. At the end of the lesson, when the bell went, they could put it all back in some sort of order.

3) I Act In The Direction Of This Solution.

Over a period of eight weeks I taught the class all their science. I organised the system of resources and overcame such problems as familiarising myself with the contents of all the resources and of reducing having to wait to talk to me by giving the pupils greater responsibility for marking their record cards and for finding their way through the master plan.

4) I Evaluate The Outcome.

In the lesson when I first experienced my problem, the pupils were learning by a rigid syllabus framework. In the final lesson of the series, my pupils were learning in their own way using a master plan of the various resources and the routes through the resources. The changes between the lessons can be analysed in terms of my values as follows:

First Lesson

No freedom for pupils to choose their topic or pace of learning
(Negation of the value of freedom)

No responsibility for organising their learning (Negation of autonomy)

Last Lesson

Some freedom to choose their topic and pace of learning

Some responsibility for organising their learning.

No enquiry learning (Negation of creativity)

Some enquiry learning.

The pupils are treated the same when there are good reasons for treating them differently (Negation of justice)

Pupils are treated differently for good reasons.

No pupil initiated activities (Negation of pupil's spontaneity)

Some pupil initiated activities.

5) I Modify My Actions/Ideas In The Light Of My Evaluations.

This fifth phase in the explanation is important as it does represent modifications to my actions and ideas in the light of criticism. For example, in four above, the movement to overcome the problems of lack of familiarity with the resources and of needing to talk to me were based upon my self criticism that I was not achieving my humanistic values in my practice.

I think that this explanation is rational in the sense that any humanist who expresses a commitment to the above values does so in the sense that s/he is struggling to live these values in their educational or social life. I am saying that my explanation for my teaching practice is structured by my attempts to live by my humanistic values. An explanation of an educational theory should be testable. In what sense is my own explanation testable? I believe it to be testable in the form I have presented it with the evidence of the videotapes of my teaching. With these tapes it is possible to communicate the meaning of my question, 'How do I improve this process of education here?' because with them I can point to what 'I', 'this' and 'here' refer to in my educational practice. The need to show you my actual behaviour and to relate my explanation directly to this behaviour brings me to an important problem in thinking about educational theory.
