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Autonomy in Education and Development

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Abstract

There is a basic conundrum that runs through human affairs: the more we try to help people to do things on their own - to become more autonomous - the more the goal seems to escape our well-intended efforts. There is some sort of contradiction between giving "outside-in" help to people to make "inside-out" changes. This problem is especially prominent in both education and development. Our task is to investigate some of the history of this problem in the hope that any source of light found in one field will illuminate the adjacent vineyard.

Introduction

My thesis is that there is deep relationship between educational and development methodologies; indeed development is best understood as education and learning writ large at the social level. Thus educational theory provides a road to development theory. Good practices to promote autonomous learning can provide strong hints about good development assistance. Conversely, some of the worse practices in development assistance become even more transparently inappropriate when viewed as educational practices.

For instance, when a child has difficulty with a homework problem, most parents know better than to just give the child the answers. Most parents would work with the child so that he or she would learn how to figure out the answers on their own. Yet in five years in the educational institute of the World Bank (then called Economic Development Institute and now, World Bank Institute), I constantly saw programmes of giving out "the answers" to people in developing countries-rather than working to help those people find their answers on their own. People who won't think of just "giving the answers" to their children apparently found it difficult to see the analogy with their professional practice of "disseminating development knowledge" in their day job.

My approach in this paper will be to pick themes from educational theory (in the tradition from Socrates to John Dewey) and then to extract the lessons for development assistance from those themes. The lessons are not specifically about Africa but, then again, they are all about Africa. The lessons show why so much conventional development assistance has failed,[1] and they show what needs to be in New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)[2] for it to succeed.

[1] See, for example, Van de Walle (2001).
[2] NEPAD represents an ambitious efforts by the African nations themselves to learn from past development efforts and to chart their own course for the future. See www.nepad.org.

The Fundamental Problem of Helping Self-Help

The long-term goal of formal education is presumably not learning a given set of "truths" but to develop the capacity and interest for learning on one's own (autonomously) long after the formal educational episode. Yet there is also the learning of older lessons, facts, and theories so that each learner can cultivate and build upon the accumulated learnings of the past without having to start from scratch. Unfortunately that part of the educational process often comes to be seen as the whole, and education is then conceptualised as the transfer of knowledge from the active and knowing teacher to the passive and unknowing student. While the student may successfully acquire and reproduce some past knowledge, the dynamics of that "educational process" tend to impede the development of the capacity for and interest in autonomous learning.

The "help" provided by the teacher in this sort of "transfer" or "dissemination" version of education precludes and crowds out self-help and self-reliance on the part of the learner. The problem of "helping self-help" is not some minor difficulty in educational practice; it is a fundamental conundrum common to all helper-doer relationships, the teacher-student relationship being only one example. In education this helping conundrum occurs in various forms as the "learning paradox." This learning paradox was clearly posed by the early twentieth century Socratic-Kantian, Leonard Nelson:

> Here we actually come up against the basic problem of education, which in its general form points to the question: How is education at all possible? If the end of education is rational self-determination, i.e., a condition in which the individual does not allow his behaviour to be determined by outside influences but judges and acts according to his own insight, the question arises: How can we affect a person by outside influences so that he will not permit himself to be affected by outside influences? We must resolve this paradox or abandon the task of education. (Nelson 1949, p.18-9)

The philosopher, Gilbert Ryle, gave a particularly clear statement of the same conundrum or paradox in education.

> How can one person teach another person to think things out for himself, since if he gives him, say, the new arithmetical thoughts, then they are not the pupil's own thoughts; or if they are his own thoughts, then he did not get them from his teacher? (Ryle 1967, p.112)

Or again, the philosopher, David Hawkins, has outlined the conundrum and the connection to autonomy:

> If we ask how the teacher-learner roles differ from those of master and slave, the answer is that the proper aim of teaching is precisely to affect those inner processes

> that...cannot in principle be made subject to external control, for they are just, in essence, the processes germane to independence, to autonomy, to self-control. (Hawkins 2000, p.44)

This educational conundrum is the pedagogical version of the general helping conundrum. Over the years, the seemingly endless African development debates about aid, help, assistance, ownership, and capacity-building keep circling around and around this conundrum.

Two Forms of Unhelpful Help

Socially Engineered Help

One approach to resolving or mitigating the conundrum is to increase awareness of the ways that "help" or assistance can be "unhelpful" in the sense of not fostering autonomous learning. Then one could better implement the old norm of "First, do no harm."

One form of unhelpful help both in education and in development assistance is the controlling or social engineering form of assistance.[3] The helper has the answers or solutions and has various ways to cajole compliance on the part of the doers to these "new ways" of doing things. Then the helper has the ownership of the process, not the doers. Compliance is perfunctory and ineffective, and the doers have still not learned to find their own answers. Their own answers might even be the same as those originally provided by the controlling helpers. But the point is not the "what" but the "how." The answers do not really become the answers-for-the-doers until the doers find them through some process that gives the doers some ownership of those answers.

Educational organizations tend to create and foster domineering ownership on the part of the teachers or helpers. Organizations want to see that their staff "produce results." Staff have to take over more and more control of the process of helping the doers so that they can be sure to "show the results" demanded by their organizational superiors.

In accordance with the principle of people owning the fruits of their labour, the doers will have ownership when they are in the driver's seat (indeed, the description as "doers" would not be accurate if they had a passive role). In the standard view of knowledge-based assistance, the helpers are teachers or trainers taking the active role to transmit "knowledge for development" to the passive but grateful clients.

Since this "knowledge for development" is offered below cost or for free as an "international public good," it is quite tempting for African countries to accept this sort of knowledge-based development assistance. There are even positive incentives such as extensive travel, pleasant accommodation, generous per diems, and other vacation-like

[3] See Knaus & Martin (2003) for an insightful analysis of this form of development assistance in Bosnia today along with comparisons to the 'enlightened' control exercised by the British Raj in India. The analogies with the current "international development regimes" imposed in Africa and elsewhere are abundantly clear.

benefits offered to those who undergo the training. From the agency side, management pushes task managers or trainers to "show results"-particularly results that can be observed and evaluated back at headquarters (such as the head count in training programs). Instead of helping people learn how to fish for themselves, the task managers need to show that they have "given out a certain number of fish" or even better that they have helped set up a "fish distribution system" to scale up the delivery of the knowledge to the client country. Thus the "helpers" need to "take ownership" of the process of assistance in order to "show results" and the clients are agreeably induced to go along.

This is not a new problem. It is a version of the organizational tendency of schools to hold teachers responsible for the students' learning. For instance, one would hope that the substantive goal of school teachers is to awaken a self-starting learning capacity in the students-but that goal is difficult for a third-party to objectively certify. Hence the measurable proxy goal of passing standard tests is used, and then teachers are pushed by educational administrators to fulfil the 'results-based' requirements by drilling students to pass the standard tests. In this way, the shoe-horning of education into the procrustean bed of results-based contracts would probably do more harm than good to the original substantive goals of education.

> In a way, it is all quite ironic. Parents, politicians, and school administrators all want students to be creative problem-solvers and to learn material at a deep, conceptual level. But in their eagerness to achieve these ends, they pressure teachers to produce. The paradox is that the more they do that, the more controlling the teachers become, which...undermines intrinsic motivation, creativity, and conceptual understanding in the students. ...The same is true for managers and others in one-up positions. The more they feel pressured to get results from their employees (or children, or athletes, or students) the harder they push. Unfortunately, in the process, they typically sabotage their own efforts. (Deci 1995, p.158)

Indeed, educational and developmental organizations face very similar pressures. The educational thinker, Robert McClintock, has masterfully described the way in which ancient self-directed study was slowly displaced by teacher-centred instruction in modern times.

> As passionate causes wracked human affairs,...people found it hard to maintain restraint, they ceased to be willing merely to help in the self development of their fellows; they discovered themselves burdened, alas, with paternal responsibility for ensuring that their wards would not falter and miss the mark....Pressures - religious, political, social, economic, humanitarian pressures - began to mount upon the schools, and it soon became a mere matter of time before schools would be held accountable for the people they produced. (McClintock 1982, p.60; quoted in Candy 1991, p.32)

A similar history could be given for the whole modern "industry" of development

agencies; the more the agencies take "responsibility" for developmental outcomes, the less "ownership" on the part of the developing countries. Judith Tendler (1975) develops a particularly powerful version of this thesis that organizational ownership undermines and crowds out client ownership. Without working to generate its own supply of good projects, a development agency would have insufficient "deal flow" to justify its own budgets.

> The initial position of the Bank was that preparation of a project was the responsibility of the borrower; if the Bank became involved, it could not thereafter be sufficiently objective in appraising the project. Though buttressed by logic, this position soon gave way to the pressure of events. "Experience has demonstrated that we do not get enough good projects to appraise unless we are involved intimately in their identification and preparation." (quoted sentence from: Mason & Asher 1973, p.308; whole quote from: Baum 1970, p.6 and quoted in Tendler 1975, p.87)

The pressure was generated by the low quality as well as small quantity of projects. The development agency is like a company that receives "inputs" (project proposals) of such a poor quality that the company cannot produce its own "product" (funded projects). Hence the company needs to vertically integrate the production of the input into its own operations.

> This taking over of project generation by development assistance institutions is like the backward vertical integration of firms in the private sector. The organization expands "backward" into the task environment and starts to "manufacture" project applications itself. It thereby lessens the high degree of uncertainty of the environment from which it must get its inputs, assuring itself of a more reliable source of supply. (Tendler 1975, p.103)

Thomas Dichter (2003) writing over a quarter of a century later shows powerfully that this tendency of organizational imperatives in the "Dev Biz" to subvert development continues unabated if not strengthened today. This *Tendler effect* shows how the organizational imperative to "take responsibility" for the "product" crowds out the ownership of the clients and leads to passivity and dependency.

> That is, the more that donor organizations are able to impose order on the outside decisionmaking that affects their product, the better they can perform their task. In so doing, however, they bring dependency to those whose decisionmaking has been so ordered. Seen in this light, dependency is the result not necessarily of design but of an organization's attempts to do well. (Tendler 1975, p.109)

Yes, "it is all quite ironic." The same logic ramifies through every level of educational and developmental organizations. Those who teach or help must "show results" in order "to

do well" so more and more responsibility and ownership is taken over to the detriment of the learners or doers of development.

Benevolent Help

Another form of unhelpful help is exemplified by benevolently "giving out the answers" which creates dependency rather than autonomy. In America, Jane Addams, John Dewey, and Christopher Lasch (among others) have developed a critique of benevolence and compassion along these lines. Dewey expressed the argument as a critique of oppressive benevolence,[4] and Lasch juxtaposed the "ethic of respect" to the "ethic of compassion" (Lasch 1995).

Dewey's thinking about the dependency-creating aspects of paternalistic employers was prompted by the Pullman Strike of 1894 and by the critique of Pullman's paternalism in the Chicago reformer Jane Addams' essay "A Modern Lear" (1965), an essay that Dewey called "one of the greatest things I ever read both as to its form and its ethical philosophy" (quoted by Lasch in Addams 1965, p.176).

> As its title suggests, Addams's essay was based on an extended analogy between the relationship between King Lear and his daughter Cordelia and that of Pullman and his workers. Like Lear, Addams suggested, Pullman exercised a self-serving benevolence in which he defined the needs of those who were the objects of this benevolence in terms of his own desires and interests. Pullman built a model company town, providing his workers with what he took to be all the necessities of life. Like Lear, however, he ignored one of the most important human needs, the need for autonomy. (Westbrook 1991, p.89)

Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago was one of the leading examples of settlement houses in the turn-of-the-century settlement movement. The settlement workers by living with and working with the poor tried to use an ethic of respect in contrast to the ethic of benevolence exemplified by the charity organizations of the day.

Respect, starting with the self-respect of the poor, is related to their working to improve their own affairs, not being a target for "betterment."

> Self-respect arises only out of people who play an active role in solving their own crises and who are not helpless, passive, puppet-like recipients of private or public services. To give people help, while denying them a significant part in the action, contributes nothing to the development of the individual. In the deepest sense it is not giving but taking - taking their dignity. Denial of the opportunity for participation is the denial of human dignity and democracy. It will not work. (Alinsky 1971, p.123)

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[4] Dichter (2003, p.98) quotes from Charles Dickens' Bleak House on "rapacious benevolence."

Dewey developed at some length his critique of "oppressive benevolence." According to Westbrook, Dewey held that:

> Self-realization was a do-it-yourself project; it was not an end that one individual could give to or force on another. The truly moral man was, to be sure, interested in the welfare of others - such an interest was essential to his own self-realization - but a true interest in others lay in a desire to expand their autonomous activity, not in the desire to render them the dependent objects of charitable benevolence. (Westbrook 1991, p.46-7)

Too often social workers and reformers treated the poor as an inert or wayward mass to be improved or bettered. An incapacity for beneficial self-activity was assumed to be part of the poor's condition so reformers would treat them accordingly.

> The conception of conferring the good upon others, or at least attaining it for them, which is our inheritance from the aristocratic civilization of the past, is so deeply embodied in religious, political, and charitable institutions and in moral teachings, that it dies hard. Many a man, feeling himself justified by the social character of his ultimate aim (it may be economic, or educational, or political), is genuinely confused or exasperated by the increasing antagonism and resentment which he evokes, because he has not enlisted in his pursuit of the "common" end the freely cooperative activities of others. (Dewey & Tufts 1908, p.303-4)

Thus an autonomy-respecting interaction would work to establish the conditions "which permit others freely to exercise their own powers from their initiative, reflection, and choice." (Dewey & Tufts 1908, p.302) Dewey made his education-based observations at the beginning of the twentieth century and yet the lessons are as relevant today - even after the half-century of the post-WWII development efforts.

Starting from Where the Doers Are and Seeing through Their Eyes

Much "bad development assistance" consists in getting countries to "pass good laws" and then expecting everyone to wake up the next morning and start acting like the people in the donor's or helper's own developed country. In a similar manner, much bad pedagogy is based on assuming that the students already have the background, interest, and framework necessary to learn a certain discipline so that it will be quickly assimilated as the result of instruction.

But for learning to take hold, the teacher would do better to start with where the students are - their way of seeing the world, their interests, and their pressing problems. To engage peasants in the process of gaining literacy, Paulo Freire (1970) recommended constructing lessons based on discussions with the peasants based on their world and their problems. The

same methodology seems to have evolved independently in the Citizenship Schools teaching literacy in the American Civil Rights Movement. The literacy pedagogy was described by one of the first teachers: "They tell me a story, a story which I write down, then they learn to read the story. It's their story in their words, and they are interested because it's theirs" (quoted in Horton 1998, p.103). John Dewey's pedagogy had a similar technique of starting with some practical task that had the students' interest and engagement, and then wove the instruction into the process of solving the problems thrown up by that practical task. The purpose was not at all to make educational "vocational" but to ground the education in the world-view and interests of the learners.

In the development literature, Albert Hirschman's theory of unbalanced growth (1961) could be usefully seen through Dewey's lens that focuses educational and change efforts on the current interests and concerns of the learners (1916). Rather than try to impose a comprehensive balanced growth program little of which might engage the doers in a country, start from their pressing problems where pressure is building up to break out of the old way of doing things. Once change takes place to resolve that problem, other problems will be entrained from bottlenecks that appear and constraints that start to bind. Attention is then refocused on those problems, and the ground is prepared for further progress.

A related point is to try to understand why students make a mistake or are in error rather than just telling them to replace their wrong answer with the right answer. In a recent meta-study on learning research, one of the main findings was that:

> Students come to the classroom with preconceptions about how the world works. If their initial understanding is not engaged, then may fail to grasp the new concepts and information that are taught, or they may learn them for purposes of a test but revert to their preconceptions outside the classroom. (Donovan et al. 1999, p.15)

Thus the teachers "must draw out and work with the pre-existing understandings that their students bring with them" (Donovan et al. 1999, p.15). In Eleanor Duckworth's development of Piagetian pedagogy, she emphasizes how this requires some skill in listening.[5]

> A good listener, or a good understander of explanations, is aware that his first interpretation of what is being said may not be the right one, and he keeps making guesses about what other interpretations are possible. This ability is singularly undeveloped in little children but it should be highly developed in good teachers, who try to listen to what children are trying to say to them. (Duckworth 1973, p.142)

This pedagogical point then carries over to development assistance as a form of social learning.

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[5] See Salmen (1987), Slim & Thompson (1993), and Narayan et al. (2000) for a development of this theme in development assistance.

> Like a teacher who tries to "give reason" to her pupils, seeking out the sense that underlies their apparently senseless questions, policy makers have a rational interest in giving reason to the apparently perverse behavior of their intended beneficiaries.
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> But in order to "give reason" to the patterns of behavior manifested by other actors in the environment, policy makers must be able, again, to put themselves in their shoes, entering into their ways of framing the policy situation and constructing meaning for the policy object. (Schon & Rein 1994, p.185)[6]

Respect Autonomy of Doers

Our overall point is that assistance or help in development as in education should respect the autonomy of the doers or learners. One route to this result is by applying the activist philosophy of education to development as social learning. Instead of being externally imposed, transformation can only come from within as a result of activities carried out by an individual - or a larger organization, government, or country. As Tawney observed about China in the early 30s, "Salvation could not be imported from the West, even if the West possessed it; it is not an article of commerce. It must come from China herself, if it is to come at all" (Tawney 1966 (orig. 1932), p.186).[7] While compliant behavior can be elicited from the outside, a country must "be in the driver's seat" in order to undergo a sustainable transformation. Similarly, "ownership" of an outcome comes from the outcome being the fruits of the activities of the individual, organization, or country, not from being a gift or an imposition.

If the client country should take the initiative and be in the driver's seat then how should a development agency initiate a project? In order to be rooted in the local soil, projects should not be initiated; embryonic projects should be found. This strategy is expressed in Schumacher's favourite themes:

> The first task is to study what people are already doing...and to help them do it better.... The second task is to study what people need and to investigate the possibility of helping them to cover more of their needs out of their own productive efforts. (Schumacher 1997, p.125)

See where water is flowing in a good direction on its own accord and then widen and deepen the channel so that the stream might grow to a river.[8] Look for the positive changes already starting to take place in the underlying institutions (a "moving train") and then apply

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[6] In a footnote, Schon and Rein attribute the phrase "giving reason" to a (1979) report on "The Teacher Project" by Eleanor Duckworth and Jeanne Bamberger. See also Duckworth (1987).

[7] Or as Jane Jacobs has put it: "Development cannot be given. It has to be done. It is a process, not a collection of capital goods." (1984, p.119) "Development is a do-it-yourself process; for any economy it is either do it yourself or don't develop." (1984, p.140)

[8] As Chinese Communist reformer, Hu Qili, described this very un-Bolshevik methodology: "We allow the little streams to flow. We simply watch in which direction the water flows. When the water flows in the right direction we build channels through which these streams can lead to the river of socialism." (Quoted

development incentives ("jump on board") to strengthen those pre-existing tendencies.[9] The development aid should not be controlling in the sense that the train should be moving anyway (i.e., by virtue of the country's "internal motivation"). That is, the "moving train" should not be extrinsically motivated as a means to get the aid. If no trains are moving, then motion induced by "bribes" is unlikely to transform the underlying institutions.

These points might be illustrated by juxtaposing two very simple models of change. In a top-down or planning model, an agency offers incentives to mobilize agents of change to bring about a certain desired transformation. This might work if the transformation only concerns various stroke-of-the-pen reforms that can be implemented by external motivation. But for most structural or institutional reforms, changes in short-term behavior incentivized by the agency will be quite insufficient to induce a transformation. This sort of transformation can only come out of the internal motivations embedded in the processes of the society. An external helper can at best locate, not create, the agents of change and then perhaps help them along. But "one thing leads to another" by virtue of horizontal pressures and linkages within a society and eventually the desired reforms may take place as a result of these strengthened internal processes of change. Faced with certain obstacles to development, an advisor might try to locate agents of change and would explore "how, by moving the economy forward elsewhere, additional pressure (economic and political) could be brought on the obstacle to give way" (Hirschman 1971, p.184).

It may well be that autonomy-respecting development assistance is on a different time scale than the imposed development projects which answer to a schedule given by the central agency. Projects that were imposed and were not based on domestic consensus and initiative only seem to be quicker. Such projects are much more likely to fail, fall victim to the vicissitudes of the political process, and have to be repeatedly "undone and done over."[10]

Conventional development assistance in Africa typically tries to transplant a "best practice" backed up by conditionalities on policy-based lending or aid to motivate the country to implement the best-practice recipes. Yet, this policy reform process is designed to promote neither active learning nor lasting institutional change. It will undermine people's incentives

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in: Harding 1987, p.318) A related "pave the paths" metaphor is used by Christopher Williams (1981, p.112). In a complex of new buildings, let grass grow between them, see where footpaths develop, and then pave the paths.

[9] Project managers in development agencies sometimes unfortunately view projects with autonomous initiative (a "moving train") as "not invented here" and not a result of their efforts. Moreover, unlike centrally-initiated projects, such indigenous projects might evolve in ways that are outside the perceived policy guidelines of the development agency. Centrally-initiated pseudo-projects with little legitimacy or embeddedness can still be presented to one's superiors as "our project" in which "we can take pride-it would not have happened without our help." Indeed.

[10] "Moreover, the method of awakening and enlisting the activities of all concerned in pursuit of the end seems slow; it seems to postpone accomplishment indefinitely. But in truth a common end which is not made such by common, free voluntary cooperation in process of achievement is common in name only. It has no support and guarantee in the activities which it is supposed to benefit, because it is not the fruit of those activities. Hence, it does not stay put. It has to be continually buttressed by appeal to external, not voluntary, considerations; bribes of pleasure, threats of harm, use of force. It has to be undone and done over." (Dewey & Tufts 1908, p.304)

to develop their own capacities and weaken their confidence in using their own intelligence. There is a real danger that a development intervention, instead of acting as a catalyst or midwife to empower change in an autonomy-respecting manner, will only short-circuit people's learning activities and reinforce their feelings of impotence. The substantial external incentives may temporarily overpower the springs of action that are native to the institutional matrix of the country, but that will probably not induce any lasting institutional reforms. As these reforms were externally imposed rather than actively appropriated by the country, there would be little "ownership" of the reforms. Compliance might be only perfunctory; the "quick" transplant might soon wither and die - to then be reinstalled in an "improved" form by the next generation of energetic task managers anxious to prove their worth in the development agency.

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