Personal Identity Paper

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Introduction

The present assignment asks us to explore our personal family story to help us identify causal influences which color our present outlook. We are then asked: "How do you believe your personal experiences will impact your view about education, school, and your future working in a school setting?" There is little doubt that our present views are impacted by our personal experiences; however, the defining experiences in question are not necessarily limited to those with a particular connection to our family story. For the moment, we will leave that as an open question.

Furthermore, although the course, "Introduction to Special Education" is clearly concerned with the particular needs of students with disabilities, this aspect is not specifically mentioned in the present assignment. We are asked about our views on education, but a careful reading of the assignment does not show any particular reference to "special" education. It is therefore with some trepidation that I conclude that there is no expectation that I ought to give special attention to this aspect.

Finally, I considered the question of how my family and other experiences have impacted on my overall life philosophy, my views on personal relationships and my own efforts towards emotional growth. Again, except for the suggestive nature of the *title* of the assignment ("Personal Identity and Reflection"), I find no positive indication that I ought to delve into these very complex and personal questions. There assignment clearly asks how one's background affects his views on education, rather than life in general. I hope I am therefore justified in so limiting the scope of the discussion which follows.

Having thus defined the scope of this essay, I propose to begin at the end: by expounding on my views of the education system. I will then show how my views have tended to label me as an outsider. Finally, I will review my family history to identify possible factors which may have led me to adopt the type of views I hold today.

My Views on Education

I have often asked myself what I will tell my students when they inevitably ask me, "why do we have to solve a quadratic equation?", or "why do we need to graph a parabola?" Of course I know all the "right" answers:

because you'll need it when you take calculus in university;

because today's high tech economy needs workers who can do those things;

or, because it trains your mind in logical thinking;

My problem is that I simply don't believe in those answers. I believe that the best justification for studying math is that the student is driven by an inner desire to learn. I cannot for the life of me find fault with a student who happens to lack that particular desire. And for him, it will take all my self-control to bite my tongue and stop myself from saying "You have to do it because that's what the government says you're supposed to do in Senior 4".

Why should a student care about solving quadratic equations? For me, there is absolutely no reason why he should! And yet it happens to be an unexplainable, bizarre feature of human nature that perhaps 30% of the human population is capable of being fascinated by this very question. The tragedy of the education system is two-fold: first, that only a minority of those "thirty-percenters", the potentially avid mathematicians among our students, are presented with

the problem in such a way that their latent curiosity is properly piqued; and secondly, that great numbers of students who have decidedly less inherent capacity to enjoy such esoteric questions for their own sake are nevertheless driven by the pressure of society to subject themselves to countless hours of needless suffering in the name of the almighty curriculum.

It is certainly the teacher's job to teach the provincially-mandated curriculum. As a teacher, I will not be able to alter that fact. However, there is nothing which compels me to believe in the inherent sanctity of that curriculum. That is where I believe I will be different from other teachers. What I believe is important in education is the proverbial moment when a student feels the light bulb turn on inside his head. If the student has any inborn capacity whatsoever to experience such a moment in the context of mathematics, I will help him to realize that moment. If other teachers fail to do so, it is not so much that they're incapable; it's that they've bought into the idea that their primary goal is to deliver the curriculum, and all that "stuff about understanding" is merely secondary. I will do it because I believe with all the strength of my conviction that the opposite is true.

Am I saying that I won't teach the curriculum? Of course not. What I am saying is that I don't really care what is or isn't on the curriculum in any given course. I am required to work through the curriculum with the students because that is what the government expects. But the purpose of the exercise is not, in my opinion, that at the end the student should be able to demonstrate competency in the specific material covered in that unit. The true purpose is that along the way, the student should have the opportunity to experience what I have called, for lack of a more specific description, the sensation of the light bulb turning on in his head. If you have personally experienced that feeling, then no further definition is necessary; and if you have not, then no definition will make it any more clear.

What makes me so sure that I am justified in dismissing the importance of the curriculum? I might refer to the extreme paucity of occasions on which I personally have had the opportunity to draw on my own personal knowledge of high school math in the course of my working life. But even more to the point: if mastery of the curriculum is really so important, then what are we to make of the fact that almost no one remembers what they learned in high school math even a month after their final exam? This is a claim whose truth is so obvious as to be virtually beyond dispute. Only today one of my sponsoring teachers spontaneously offered up, for no particular reason, the observation that he remembers "absolutely nothing" of what he "learned" in high school math. If it is truly important for the economic needs of our society that our young people acquire competency in the curriculum, then the country is surely doomed. In fact, however, society seems to be muddling along quite adequately, quadratic equations or no quadratic equations.

How my Beliefs Conflict with the Norm

I do not need to delve into my distant past to flesh out the above narrative with anecdotal evidence. Today in class a small incident took place which clearly illustrates where my views conflict with the conventional wisdom. It was not an argument I sought out, but it is one I will undoubtedly find myself thrust into again and again.

We were given a small in-class group assignment to write up an "achievement indicator" (including solution method) for a particular outcome chosen from the Math 10E curriculum: in particular, to "solve problems that involve determining the best buy". For our example we chose

the problem of showing that a 375-ml jar of maple syrup at $7.99 was a better buy than a 250-ml jar at $5.99.

If you regularly eat pancakes on Sunday morning, as we do in my family, then you will recognize that this is not merely a theoretical problem. I know how I personally solve the problem in the grocery aisle, and I also know that there is a more formal method called “unit pricing” that some people like to teach because you just divide the quantity by the total price. So I wrote up two solutions: Method 1, Unit Pricing, and Method 2, Proportional Method.

When the professor came to our table and saw what I had written, he challenged me to defend my choices. I can only guess that he thought that this would be a good opportunity for a “teaching moment”: in particular, it seems he was intent on making me acknowledge that one method was clearly more appropriate than the other for the students I would be teaching in 10E.

I did my best to suggest that some students might prefer one method, and some the other; so I would teach both methods. But that was not satisfactory. “That will only confuse the students, and in any case you usually won’t have time to teach two methods.” He insisted that I choose one or the other, with a strong implication that one choice was the right one. And everybody knew which choice he was thinking of.

Of course he wanted me to say that the unit pricing method was more “appropriate”. Proportional reasoning requires that you think about what you are doing, while the unit pricing method can be done by straightforward application of a simple formula. And it’s much easier to teach. You give the formula at the top of the worksheet, with a solved example. Then you give ten or twenty problems with the same basic information, and the student applies the template to

one question after another. The student thinks he is learning, and the teacher thinks he is teaching.

What is my problem with this scenario? It trains the student to answer an identically-formatted question on a test, providing the system with an "objective measure" to show that the learning outcome has been achieved. But what has the student really learned? As I see it, he has merely learned to follow instructions without really knowing what he is doing. And this is the exact opposite of what math is supposed to be.

I am not interested in the "practical" issue of helping my student to save 17 cents on a can of tuna fish. I am interested in how I can contribute to his intellectual development; how I can help grow her mind to appreciate and even enjoy the pleasure of thinking in ways that are perhaps objectively inexplicable but which I know are real because I have experienced them myself. I don't care about specific techniques, because different individuals may find their own inspiration in any number of different ways. It really has nothing to do with the fact that I happen to prefer Method 2 over Method 1. What appals me is the prospect that a committee will decide how everyone is supposed to do a certain calculation, and that it will be my job as a teacher to enforce that committee's decision.

(And although it is hardly relevant to the larger issue, I can't resist pointing out the great flaw in the whole idea of teaching math by formulas: they don't work! They don't work because people misapply them in any number of ways. And people misapply the formulas because they don't understand them. The present example is an ideal case in point. There is a particular danger in teaching any formula involving division, because it is very difficult to remember if it's A divided by B or vice versa. (Formulas involving multiplication are of course immune to this

specific pitfall!) When I introduced “unit pricing” seven paragraphs ago, I said you just divide the quantity by the total price. In fact, it’s the other way around. Who would notice the difference, or remember which is which? In practise, the odds of making the right choice in the field are little better than fifty-fifty. You might as well toss a coin to decide which brand of tuna fish to buy.)

There is an odd ending to the story, which I ought to mention. Upon being pressed to choose between Method 1 and Method 2, I happened to glance at the curriculum guide and saw that the method of proportional reasoning was specifically noted. I pointed this out to the professor who replied, “Then that’s the method you should teach”. Needless to say, I found this outcome no more satisfying than the alternative.

The Jewish Iconoclast

Abraham, father of the Jews, was according to folklore the original iconoclast. The Greek word means literally a “smasher of idols”; Abraham’s father was an idol-maker, and according to legend that is just what Abraham did to his father’s merchandise one fine day by way of making a certain abstract theological point.

What defines my world-view if anything is not so much the fact that I have strongly held opinions as that I believe in standing up for those opinions even when (*especially* when?) they put me in conflict with those in authority. I can’t help but feel that this tendency reflects my identification with a people who have stood up for their beliefs in the face of two thousand years of the cruelest persecution. And although the specific tenets of the Jewish religion itself mean nothing to me, I feel it would be the height of cowardice to back down from my own beliefs in

the face of such trivial consequences as the possibility of, for instance, losing my job, or getting a poor grade in a course.

I cannot end this discussion without mentioning the influence of my father. As a politician, Sid Green is remembered still for the electrifying speeches he delivered back in the day when he would hold the entire Manitoba Legislature spellbound. But it wasn't just his eloquence that set him apart from other politicians. I remember him once sharing a platform with then-Liberal-MLA Lloyd Axworthy, now President of the U of W. On the one hand was the consummate politician, exuding calmness, control, self-assurance; on the other hand, the consummate anti-politician: sharp, abrasive, and argumentative. The difference that you probably only noticed if it was pointed out to you was that after one of them spoke, you felt good but you were hard-pressed to say exactly what had been promised; but from the other, you were crystal-clear: like it or not, you knew exactly where he stood. I am proud to stand in the latter tradition, and I think the world needs more of it.