

Running head: ETHICS OF EDUCATION

Ethics of Education Through the Lens of Henry David Thoreau

Terry Smith

Pepperdine University

terry.k.smith@pepperdine.edu

April 5, 2010

Abstract:

Henry David Thoreau was outspoken on many important issues in his day among which were politics, religion, slavery, and education. As a teacher himself, if only briefly, Thoreau encountered ethical dilemmas in how education was administered, how education was inequitable, and how education fell short of the real learning that occurs when an individual has the opportunity to experience education fitting the simple models and lessons of nature. Education approaches of today based on high stakes testing, fitting humans into standard molds, and punishing teachers for their students' unwillingness to learn would all be prime targets for the critical attack of Mr. Thoreau if he were in today's world. This writer argues that Thoreau would judge the education system of today to be unethical to students for depriving them of a full education, and unethical to teachers for forcing conformity on them and suppressing their talents with narrow state mandated curricula.

### **Thoreau on Education**

Philosopher, writer, and transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau wrote in *Walden*: “The life which men praise and regard as successful is but one kind. Why should we exaggerate any one kind at the expense of the others?” (1849, 1906, p. 21).

To be a transcendentalist means that Thoreau associated himself with a controversial political, philosophical, and literary movement in New England in the early nineteenth century. Others notable in this movement were Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Amos Bronson Alcott, and Theodore Parker. Transcendentalists criticized the state of society for its lack of individualism, for its drive toward conformity, and for its acceptance of slavery. Nature was a major symbol of the movement especially to Emerson and Thoreau, and was also a main focus and foundation of their writing. The transcendentalist view remained strong and clear as Thoreau approached the task of addressing the ills of his society.

A singular important concern for Thoreau was education, and his criticism of schools was but one area in which Thoreau sought to point out ethical problems in society: “It is only when we forget all our learning that we begin to know” (1849, 1906, p. 317). He raised the question that if we were to have schools, should not our students be introduced to knowledge in light of their humanity, that is, learning that fits the world from which we all come? He found that school learning as evolved in his society did not come close to a naturally influenced kind of learning, did not approach the lessons found existing in the world. This disconnect had important effects on the lives of people. His realization came while teaching for a short time in Canton, Massachusetts. He quit the

position because, among other things, students were being punished by whipping them with a tree branch, something he could not condone. Thoreau questioned how punishment could be a part of educating a person. After attempting several times to find other teaching positions, he decided to start a school with his brother John, which he did in Concord in May of 1835 (Willson, 1962).

### **Project Learning**

In a very innovative approach, the Thoreaus' school touted the use of the project method in vocational training, using all of nature as its classroom space, a regard for psychology, and with no corporal punishment allowed (Hoagland, 1955). In this setting, a teacher should be more of a peer with the students, someone who learns alongside the student.

Thoreau said students “should not play life, or study it merely . . . but earnestly live it from beginning to end. How could youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living?” (Willson, 1962).

But even with a new environment, Thoreau discovered that students do not always learn what they are taught, especially when what is being taught is a *study*, and not real life. He began to feel like a failure as a teacher and attributed it to the fact that he was doing it more as a job, than for the good of his fellow man. He learned something about rote learning that educators today are also discovering, that although his students got “a valuable drilling, it may be, but they do not learn what you profess to teach” (Willson, 1962).

In a few years, in 1841, the school closed when Thoreau's brother left because of illness, although this was not the prime reason for its closing. Later in a journal entry,

Thoreau wrote: “How vain to try to teach youth, or anybody truths! They can only learn them after their own fashion, and when they get ready” (1849, 1906, Journal XIII, p. 67). He realized that the beliefs he held as to what a teacher does, did not forward his intentions. The ethical treatment of any student entering a school should be embedded in the mission and foundation of that school. If any sort of equitable pedagogy was to exist, it would depend on an ethical teacher (Block, 2008).

### **Altering the Language**

Thoreau looked at what a student encounters when studying his own language. A teacher takes the beauty and power of what language can do in society and distorts it into its mechanics, and further, molds its usage so as to be a tool of those in learned higher society. On the process of teaching writing, Thoreau declared:

You take a sentence and analyze it, you decide . . . if it is long or short, simple or compound, and how many clauses it is composed of; if the i's are all dotted, or some for variety without dots; what the color and composition of the ink and the paper; if it is considered a fair or mediocre sentence accordingly, and you assign its place among the sentences you have seen and kept specimens of. But as for the meaning of the sentence, that is as completely overlooked as if it had none .... if you should ever perceive the meaning you would disregard all the rest (1849, 1906, Journal XII, p. 372).

### **Educational Elitism**

It was clear to Thoreau that there was no equity or fairness in education because although education was a foundation for democratic society, it was just as surely a definer of classes in society (Willson, 1962). So not only was Thoreau a critic of what education does to the individual, he also lashed out at the system in general for its aristocratic

foundation which affected entire groups of citizens. Although he was outside of education, no longer a teacher, he continued his critical ethical analysis of education. The failure of common education was by design, a deliberate failure for lower class, non wealthy citizens. A journal entry reads as follows:

We have a comparatively decent system of common schools, schools for infants only . . . but . . . no school for ourselves. It is time that we had uncommon schools, that we did not leave off our education when we begin to be men .... It is time that villages were universities (1849, 1906, Journal IV, p. 323).

And what kind of men were being produced in the education system of Thoreau's time? By his measure, shells of academics were emerging, professors in name, but not knowledge. In Walden, he wrote: "To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust (Thoreau, 1950, p. 11). A role or title of philosopher is not a philosopher, but even so the bearer of the title could hold a position of status in an institution that, per Thoreau, was as flawed as it could be.

### **A Natural Model**

By contrast, he wrote about the ritual of the Indians called *husquenaughing*, a practice expected of young men to initiate them to survival in nature, an education building their abilities to adapt to unknown situations. Salomon (1962) provides an example of education that Thoreau found working in fields of huckleberries, that is, a combination of kindergarten, school house, and adult-education. "I served my apprenticeship and have since done considerable journey-work in the huckleberry field

though I never paid for my schooling and clothing in that way. It was some of the best schooling I got, and paid for itself” (p. 24 ).

What should be a naturally occurring path of intellectuality has been distorted by educators, and redefined to match their teaching needs. In his words: a teacher “makes a straight-cut ditch of a free and meandering brook” (Thoreau 1849, 1906, Journal VIII, p. 83), an inferior construction by all accounts when compared to what nature had placed there. By a similar analogy, Salomon (1962) interpreted Thoreau to mean that learning can happen in a school, but it is more suited to emerging from serious conversation of reality rather than what has been modified or repackaged for study.

Life then is the same as education, not a study of it, but a living of it. Education should be not looking at academics, but *being* or *doing* academics.

How can youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living? Methinks this would exercise their minds as much as mathematics. If I wished a boy to know something about the arts and sciences, for instance, I would not pursue the common course, which is merely to send him into the neighborhood of some professor, where anything is professed and practiced but the art of life (Thoreau, 1849, 1906, Journal II, p. 56-57).

### **Education and Religion**

As well, Thoreau condemned how religion had become blended with education to the point of muddying and distorting both disciplines. Any improvement toward an ethical treatment of people in education would have to include an extraction of religion from schools. In a particularly scathing journal description, he described people in general as unable to understand the significance of transcendentalism if the term were not couched

in religious references. If people heard the word spoken by a priest for example, they might take note assuming it is of importance, but otherwise, such a phrase might pass as nonsense (Thoreau, 1950). The populace, by his account, was erroneously trained in this mix of education and religion so as to consider bible references worth knowing, while misunderstanding or rejecting other ways of thinking such as transcendentalism. Education, as a servant institution was an ethical failure to society.

### **The Question of Ethics in Education: Then and Now**

Thoreau had few good words to say about education in his time, seeing its manifestations either wholly responsible for separating people by classes, and creating select organizations and groups which excluded the common village person. In addition, religion had an historical underpinning for education, ties to churches and communities, ministers and teachers intermingled, which Thoreau saw as further ruin of any possible system for a socially responsible and effective function in society.

How much has changed today? Churches still have close connections to education, though somewhat more at a distance than in Thoreau's time. So while he might in fact note some improvement in 2010, Thoreau would likely recognize that some things just stay the same. He used the *straight-cut ditch* metaphor to describe what educators had done to the experience and the acquisition of knowledge. A natural meandering brook takes its own path based on terrain, soil composition, plant life, and rainfall. The outcome is a thing of natural shape, gentle curves, a fit in its place in the landscape. Educators, per Thoreau, saw fit to change, to improve the natural aspect of the meandering brook, that is to capture the essence of the brook and straighten it for their

own purposes. Such is the case of taking the language and reconfiguring it into a mechanistic structure to be tested, to be properly revered, to become something unrelated to its original function. Educators would uphold the captured essence of language and call it *knowledge* and it didn't matter if that knowledge had meaning or everyday use to people, or if had become a commodity shared among an exclusionary group of people.

A similar distortion can be seen throughout the public education system in the United States. Education leaders in Washington point out that the world is leaving us behind; students in other countries are scoring higher on tests than are the students in the United States. As such, learning has been relegated to the scorecard, but public education should not be thought of in any terms as a business since there is no relation; one cannot measure the experiences and understandings of people from test results only (Pinar, 2004). Other researchers hold similar holistic views and considerations of how human learning occurs, (Vygotsky, 1978; Brown, Collins, and Duguid, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991) specifically that it is a social community activity, a definition that wholly fits what Thoreau would consider an ethical approach to learning. The charting and the distorting of people's natural tendencies toward political targets would be how Thoreau would view education today. He would look at the plight of teachers who are held responsible for students to test well, students who may or may not want to learn, and he would remember his own experiences as a young teacher when he saw this phenomenon.

### **Standardizing the Student**

As in Thoreau's time, students of today come from many backgrounds with different degrees of parenting quality. From a teacher's perspective, these differences are obvious and result in classrooms of varying ability students. In an approach that is

inherently unfair, the state, however, sees students as the same, all with the ability to learn. Applying the *straight-cut ditch* approach, their natural differences can be ignored and their learning gauged with a single, one size fits all test. Turning now to the teachers, they are held accountable for the test scores from this widely diverse population of students. A test, a single question set extracts the knowledge of the students, and everyone in the education system knows this is flawed, unfair, unrepresentative of learning, and essentially an unethical assessment of most students' abilities, as well as an unethical assessment of their teachers. To repeat Thoreau's words: "How vain to try to teach youth, or anybody truths! They can only learn them after their own fashion, and when they get ready" (1849, 1906, Journal XIII, p. 67).

### **Standardizing the Teacher**

Experienced teachers know that many variables affect how a student learns, and how a student scores on a test. The parents' level of education and household income can be important indicators of those test scores. Title 1 schools and schools with high percentages of students on free and reduced lunch programs consistently do worse on state assessments of reading and math than their more affluent counterparts (Stranahan, Borg & Borg, 1997). Is it fair or ethical to grade such deficient schools in the statewide rankings along with other schools in which the students are from middle or upper income homes and of parents with significantly more education? States that reward school districts, such as Florida with its School Recognition Program, do so based on a ranking that comes directly from district standardized tests. The rewarded schools receive extra money that usually goes into bonuses for teachers. Stranahan, Borg, and Borg (1997) argue that this form of reward is actually being done based on the composition of the

students, not on a fair system of assessment. Clearly, as Thoreau would see, what is supposed to be about educating people, is about punishing groups with lower incomes, less opportunity, and rewarding the opposite. And it could be argued that the same situation occurs in every school where teachers are under pressure to drill students in order to attain higher test scores, because the teachers are being evaluated on those scores also. Where then goes the beauty of learning, the intricate connections and rhythms Thoreau saw in natural settings? Thoreau would see the *essence* that schools purvey in their test materials as the same distortion he observed when language was converted into mechanistic symbols devoid of meaning, therefore, only a shell of its design. He would see teachers who should be growing and learning along with their students but who are instead removed from their subjects, rule bound, and prevented from offering the experiences of their expertise.

### **Applying a Thoreau Approach**

Imagining if Mr. Thoreau were here today, with his outspoken demeanor, and his notable social connections, one might well place him as a forthright voice and defender of equitable systems of education based not on rankings and politics, but based on ethical treatment of students who wish to learn according to their own goals and desires.

Thoreau understood that people are all different, and deserving of their rights as individuals. To look at the way students are educated today, toward a standardized knowledge set, assumes that this kind of fabricated life is *the* way to be. As stated in the beginning of this paper, in Walden, Thoreau wrote: “The life which men praise and regard as successful is but one kind. Why should we exaggerate any one kind at the expense of the others?”

In an ethical point of view, there are many ways to be human, many ways to contribute, many ways *to be*. Standardized approaches to learning and knowledge did not work in Thoreau's time, and there is no reason, no precedent, no evidence to argue that such methods will work in 2010.

### References

- Block, A. (2008). Why should I be a teacher? *Journal of Teacher Education*. 2008; 59; 416.
- Brown, J. S., Collins, A., & Duguid, P. (1989). Situated cognition and the culture of learning. *Educational Researcher*. , 18(1), 32-42.
- Hoagland, C. (1955) The Diary of Thoreau's Gentle Boy. *The New England Quarterly* December, 481-82.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Willson, L. (1962). Thoreau on Education. *History of Education Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Mar., 1962), pp. 19-29.
- Pinar, W. F. (2004). *What is curriculum theory?* Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Salomon, L. B. (1962). The straight-cut ditch: Thoreau on education. *American Quarterly* 14, 19-36.
- Stranahan, H., Borg, J. & Borg, M. (1997). *School grades based on standardized test scores: Are they fair?* *Journal of Academic and Business Ethics*.
- Thoreau, H.D. (1849, 1906). The writings of Henry David Thoreau. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Thoreau, Henry David (1950). *Walden and Other Writings*. Ed. Brooks Atkinson. New York: Random House.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.