

The Space of Reasons: The role of academic judgement in assessment.

Hinchliffe Geoffrey, UEA, UK

1. In *The Republic*, Plato draws a picture of people living in a cave who are so constrained that they only can see shadows on a wall that they take for reality (Plato, 1987: 258). The contrast with the cave, for those who escape, are the sunlit uplands of knowledge. The Cave is a powerful metaphor because it is utterly uncompromising: what the escapee knows is now entirely incommensurate with what he used to know. The incommensurability between the cave dwellers and those who have escaped has nothing to do with social position or social recognition. The incommensurability is not positional but *epistemic*. The cave dwellers are in a position of what might be called *epistemic dependency* (Shay, 2012, Rata 2012).

2. We can see straightaway how the metaphor can work for education: the journey from the Cave to the sunlit world is a journey of enlightenment, from ignorance to knowledge. The metaphor has relevance for education not because children and students are in the exact position of the cave dwellers but because some of their experiences may mirror the Cave. An important aim of education, then, is to liberate students from the perils of epistemic dependency.

3. The question arises as to how we are to conceptualise the knowledge and understanding that is needed to escape this dependency. Paul Hirst (1972) suggests that the focus of knowledge is “experience, structured under some conceptual scheme” (97). For, firstly, experiences can only be articulated through conceptual forms – they can only be recognised as experiences of such and such character because they are presented and articulated through a conceptual apparatus. Second, a system of concepts takes the form of publicly known and shared criteria for their application – it is this that allows experiences to be recognised, evaluated and compared. But for all that Hirst achieved one could argue that he does seem to suggest that knowledge is essentially propositional, made up of inert theorems and informational sets (Goodson, 2005) .

4. We need some way of developing these ideas so that the dynamic, shifting character of knowledge is taken into account. We need to think of knowledge in terms of discovery and justification, of argument and counter-argument. How should we do this? In his book, *Mind and World*, the philosopher John McDowell contrasts what he terms the ‘space of reasons’ with the ‘realm of natural law’. The latter is roughly the realm of propositional knowledge – for example, the laws of physics. The space of reasons relates to that human space in which we ask for and give reasons. We have to justify and give an account of our beliefs; whereas the realm of law is essentially causal and explanatory, the space of reasons is justificatory.

5. We can think of knowledge as existing in the space of reasons. From an educational point of view, what we want is for our students to learn to live in the space of reasons. For it is here that experience is articulated in the form of beliefs that are tested, contested and justified. Moreover, the ability to make *judgements* occupies a central place. What we really want our students to do is to get used to defending and criticising judgements. In that way they learn that knowledge doesn't come in neatly packaged bundles but is something difficult, not clear cut. Making and defending judgements helps students to learn how to become *responsible* for those judgements.

6. As teachers, we need to be clear in our minds what we are assessing. Are we just assessing knowledge of content and context ? Or, are we also assessing judgements and how well-founded they are ? When I listen to colleagues in Higher Education in the UK I worry sometimes that their assessment strategies only cover content and context. I worry that we don't really know how to assess judgements – or show our students how to make judgements. We have to educate them to take risks, even if sometimes that doesn't pay off. Because students have to learn – must learn – what a BAD judgement is. It as if we are reluctant ourselves to let students enter the space of reasons in a full-blown way, by our having assessment methods that play safe, that are risk-free.

7. A judgement falls short of being a statement (or assertion) of 'how things are'. Rather, it is an *estimate* of how things are, typically prefaced by an utterance of the kind: 'I believe that x, y, z.....' where the belief contains a degree of uncertainty. But there are many kinds of judgement , of which a summary is contained in table 1 below.

Table 1: Types of Judgement

| | |
|---------------------------|-------------------|
| PRACTICAL | DISCURSIVE |
| EPISTEMIC/TECHNICO | NORMATIVE |

- ◆ A practical judgement issues in a decision or recommendation
- ◆ A discursive judgement aims at a certain understanding/ interpretation and emerges out of disciplinary engagement
- ◆ Judgements will often be hybrid, exemplifying more than one type in a single judgement

8. We may come to understand the features of what constitutes a poor judgement in our students:

- ◆ Failure to make explicit the basis of normative grounds of a judgement
- ◆ Discursive judgements are likely to be weak if there is only a perfunctory engagement with epistemic/technico material
- ◆ inadequate contextual understanding
- ◆ Poor judgements usually wilt under a series of counterfactuals. By contrast, good judgements can withstand counterfactuals whether in the form of argumentation or evidence.

9. In the case of good judgements we might say:

- ◆ There is a rigour and internal robustness so that they are not easy to knock down. They have some resilience.
- ◆ it says something interesting. So the test is not just 'is it true?' but also 'Is it true but trivial?'
- ◆ Good judgements take *risks* for which the judger is responsible.

10. The space of reasons is our answer to the Cave. For Plato, the Cave is a bad place to be but he favoured an escape to what was essentially a contemplative style of knowledge and wisdom. But for us moderns, the space of reasons is the place where we need our students to be.

Bibliography

Backhurst, D. (2011) *The Formation of Reason*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Goodson, I. (2005) *Learning, Curriculum and Life Politics: the selected works of Ivor Goodson*. London: Routledge.

Hirst, P. (1972) 'Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge' in Peters, R. (ed.) *Education The Philosophy of Education*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 87-111.

McDowell, J. (1994) *Mind and World*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Plato (1987) *The Republic*. Translated by D. Lee. London: Penguin Books.

Rata, E. (2012) 'Politics of Knowledge in Education'. *British Educational Research Journal*. 38 (1), pp. 103-124.

Shay, S. (2012) *Contesting Purposes for Higher Education: a curriculum point of view*, paper delivered to the Annual Conference for the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE), Newport, South Wales, December 2012.