

SELF-EDUCATION CRITIQUED

Cornel Hamm is skeptical that “self-education (challenge education)” – see research brief #64 - merits the attention it received as a “trend-reverser ... a major Canadian educational idea having an impact on educational thought and practice in the United States.”¹ The architect of the movement was Maurice Gibbons² of Simon Fraser University. “Many of the themes,” Hamm continues, are “not unfamiliar to students of education,” as “most of them can be found in one form or another in the so-called ‘progressive’ and even ‘radical’ educational movements dating back to Rousseau,” among them “natural growth, freedom from constraint, individualization, practical and palpable utility, self-direction and self-teaching, minimization of instruction and institutional authority, self-actualization, and self-discovery.”³ “What is new,” Hamm suggests, is the “attempt to tie together these many themes into a coherent theory” that “includes a series of techniques such as individualized instruction, the ‘walkabout,’ and contract learning for implementing self-education.”⁴ While a number of “interesting claims are made about motivation to learn, ego development, and educational worth,” their meanings are unclear, Hamm complains.⁵ In this essay, Hamm will “attempt to clarify what is (or could be) meant by the term ‘self-education,’ to ascertain the status of the claims related to it in the hope of showing what kind of support and evidence they require, and to determine what is new and valuable about them.”⁶

First, Hamm asserts that “self-education, when viewed as education *of* the self, is a conceptual truth about all education and that therefore the new movement is neither novel nor interesting nor the radical new pedagogy warranted on that account.”⁷ Second, Hamm asserts that “when ‘self-education’ is viewed as education *about* the self, the movement does make good sense and has merit, but is not centrally concerned with *education*.”⁸ Third, Hamm asserts that “when self-education is viewed as education *by* the self, the new movement draws false conclusions for practice from conceptual confusions in the language of self-education, reveals a lack of clear vision of the nature of education, and makes unwarranted empirical and value assumptions.”⁹

While Hamm allows that education is a process of learning about oneself and even becoming a “self,” he disallows the conclusions “proponents of self-education draw” from it, namely that the “mastery of curriculum content, based on public forms of knowledge and experience, must be relinquished as an educational goal,” that “personal goals” are paramount.¹⁰ Hamm disputes “that personal and private knowledge is possible” (leaving psychotherapists high-and-dry) and “that the acquisition of public knowledge militates against the development of selves” (something it obviously can but need not be the case).¹¹ Relying on Wittgenstein, Hamm judges “private personal knowledge [is] for logical reasons impossible,”¹² a conclusion Wittgenstein himself would want to modify.¹³ Because “objectivity” is

“inter-subjective, inter-personal,” Hamm concludes that “all education and learning” are “social.”¹⁴ He adds: “Not only does public knowledge not militate against development of the self; it is the only way for a rational conscious person to develop.”¹⁵ Hamm continues: “The other false conclusion proponents of self-education draw is that teaching becomes largely unnecessary and undesirable,” at least not teaching conducted by another: “if all education is self-education ... children should be self-directed, self-taught, and learn without the benefit of teaching.”¹⁶ Hamm points that if all education is the development of self, then “self-education is perfectly compatible with teachers teaching and children learning, even in a very conventional manner.”¹⁷

“If the expression ‘self-education’ serves to remind teachers that their business is centrally that of developing awareness in children through conceptual growth and understanding,” Hamm allows that “the term serves a useful function,” especially to the extent that “it points to the deleterious effects of conditioning, manipulation, indoctrination, meaningless memorization, and other forms of miseducation.”¹⁸ In fact, Hamm continues, self-education has “another valuable function - to remind us that the long-term goal of all formal education is to encourage children and young people to acquire sufficient mastery of educationally valuable subject matter and to acquire interest and pleasure in its pursuit in order to continue that pursuit unassisted once they leave the formal school setting.”¹⁹ In fact: “One of the most important characteristics of the educated person is that he pursues worthwhile activities by himself without being required by others to do so. We can say then that the making of the “self-educating” person is the goal of all formal education.”²⁰ “But,” Hamm adds, “it does not follow that with this goal for formal schooling children should become directors of their own education.”²¹ Nor is there anything “startling or novel in ‘self-education’ when viewed as development of the self.”²²

What rankles Hamm is any “suggestion that there are specific characteristic qualities, states, conditions, and achievements, toward which a human being (external social influences aside) will naturally develop, and that an individual has a unique set of such settled potentialities waiting to flower into a unique natural personality, character, [or] even career.”²³ *Au contraire*: Hamm asserts that “what is *human* about human beings is not ‘natural’ at all, but rather something that is superimposed on our natural state.”²⁴ Realizing one’s potential requires, he continues, “approximating the best of human achievements,” requiring students to understand history, through social experience and learning ... that enables us to evaluate and choose what sort of human beings we ought to become and what type of nature to strive toward.”²⁵

After dismissing any notion of an intrinsic (if unrealized) self, Hamm seems here to rely on one: how can one “evaluate” and “choose” if there is no one there to do so? This contradiction leaves Hamm in an awkward position; he pivots to what he deems to be “the main concern” of “proponents,” namely affirming “the student choosing the matter and the manner of education for himself,”²⁶ which, for Hamm, “boils down to ... the simple unsupported recommendation that children should not

be taught,” a reduction (as the metaphor makes explicit) that ignores the idea that children (in Gibbons’ scheme) should be self-taught. Despite his earlier emphasis on “choosing” and “evaluating” Hamm nonetheless undermines any idea of “self-direction,” as this requires “the individual to have knowledge of the direction (goal or objective) together with the wisdom to select the appropriate direction,” possessions that (Hamm reasons) logically render being self-directed superfluous.²⁷ After dismantling the concept of self-direction, he reinscribes it when he tells us that the “solution to the motivation problem in education is not allowing children to choose what they want to do,” as that is “either a tautology or not a problem.”²⁸ “Instilling in children the desire to pursue what is in their interest to pursue when they lack that interest initially,” Hamm clarifies, “is the motivational problem in education.”²⁹

Hamm then devalues students’ interests as “whims and short-term interests as influenced by peers, parents, business, or television,” contrasting these chimera “to the planned exposure by thoughtful concerned teachers.”³⁰ If the child’s “informal environment” – a remarkably sweeping and for him dismissive idea – “is richer in experiences and sources of learning motivation than the formal school, then one might well be advised to let the child plan his own curriculum or at least let non-educationists take charge.”³¹ Hamm then backtracks, allowing that “there is much to be said for children learning about their own power of choice and their own effectiveness in making an imprint on the world, even if it means learning from their mistakes,” especially if this enables them “to take responsibility (in the moral sense of that term) for their actions.”³² He then moderates his dismissal of self-education, terming it “very risky,” especially if it allows children (here comes that verb again) “choosing their own curriculum.”³³

Hamm defines term such as “self-taught,” “self-directed,” “learning on one’s own,” and “being responsible for one’s learning” as meaning “we are not being instructed, guided, directed, or compelled by a professional teacher,”³⁴ although studying on one’s own hardly excludes by taught or directed by experts, which he implies when he writes that being an autodidact means being taught by “the ‘environment,’ by others with whom we communicate, by books and films, etc., all of which are of our own choosing.”³⁵ Such “choosing” requires “wisdom and intelligence,” Hamm continues, and these require “knowledge, wisdom, and experience,” which leaves him wondering “how much” of these is needed, a line of thinking he ends by calling it “the classical problem of freedom versus authority in education.”³⁶ Surely self-education does not exclude efforts to adjudicate these two, as authority is often internalized³⁷ and freedom fled.³⁸ Despite the conceptual and specifically logical issues he raises, I wonder if Hamm’s major irritation is that “self-education” was gaining notoriety as a novel even “breakthrough” concept and practice that would somehow solve the problems of public education. He writes:

It must not be thought that self-education is simply an improved, new technique for achieving familiar and recognized educational objectives for the public

school. Instruction in educationally valuable subject matter has historically been entrusted to the school as its primary function. Self-education represents a major shift in such objectives. With its emphasis on adjustment to the community, preparation for occupational skills, limiting instruction, removal of compulsory curriculum, it envisages the school as a multi-functioning institution embracing a host of social problems.³⁹

What self-education proposes, Hamm seems to be suggesting, is the end of the public school.

COMMENTARY

Appearing in the same issue as the Gibbons-Phillips piece, Hamm's critique seems simultaneously incisive and mean-spirited. In research brief #64 I expressed reservations concerning their (let's say) exuberance for the idea, but Hamm will have none of it. Whatever threat "self-education" posed to the public school (at least in Hamm's critique), it faded in comparison to the culture of narcissism already in place before technology – social media specifically – intensified it. Perhaps because public education remains a provincial not federal matter in Canada – and because it has never been politicized in national election campaigns – the public school as an institution has never been under the same stress in Canada as it has been in the United States. Despite efforts there to dismantle education – especially under Trump's Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos⁴⁰ – the public school there remains in place, even during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴¹

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ENDNOTES

¹ Hamm 1982, 88.

² Gibbons 1978; Gibbons and Phillips 1982.

³ Hamm 1982, 88.

⁴ Hamm 1982, 88-89.

⁵ Hamm 1982, 89.

⁶ Hamm 1982, 89.

⁷ Hamm 1982, 89.

⁸ Hamm 1982, 89.

⁹ Hamm 1982, 89.

¹⁰ Hamm 1982, 90.

¹¹ Hamm 1982, 90.

¹² Hamm 1982, 90.

¹³ At one point, Wittgenstein imagined even *Philosophical Investigations* (the text upon which Hamm draws) as written in a private language: “Nearly all of my writings are private conversations with myself. Things that I say to myself tête-à-tête” (Wittgenstein, quoted in Monk 1990, 526). Monk (1990, 530) writes that for Wittgenstein “what is required for understanding here is not the discovery of acts, nor the drawing of logically valid inferences from accepted premises – nor, still less, the constructions of *theories* – but, rather, the right point of view (from which to ‘see’ the joke, to hear the expression in the music or to see your way out of a philosophical fog).” Monk (1990, 531) adds: “But the imagination of individuals, though necessary, is not sufficient. What is further required for people to be alive to ‘aspects’ (and, therefore, for humor, music, poetry and painting to mean something) The

connections between Wittgenstein’s philosophical concern with aspect-seeing and his cultural concerns is therefore simple and direct.” While this understanding of Wittgenstein does not vindicate Gibbons, it does weaken the force of Hamm’s invocation of the *Philosophical Investigations* as incontrovertible evidence that Gibbons’ claims are false because they are illogical. Perhaps Gibbons discerns “aspects” Hamm cannot.

¹⁴ Hamm 1982, 90-91.

¹⁵ Hamm 1982, 91.

¹⁶ Hamm 1982, 91.

¹⁷ Hamm 1982, 91.

¹⁸ Hamm 1982, 91.

¹⁹ Hamm 1982, 91.

²⁰ Hamm 1982, 91.

²¹ Hamm 1982, 91.

²² Hamm 1982, 91.

²³ Hamm 1982, 93.

²⁴ Hamm 1982, 93.

²⁵ Hamm 1982, 93.

²⁶ Hamm 1982, 95.

²⁷ Hamm 1982, 96.

²⁸ Hamm 1982, 96.

²⁹ Hamm 1982, 96. This clarification seems itself tautological.

³⁰ Hamm 1982, 98.

³¹ Hamm 1982, 98.

³² Hamm 1982, 98.

³³ Hamm 1982, 98. While choosing one’s curriculum is not equivalent to choosing one’s ideals – recall that Hamm endorses the latter – there is a sense in which one cannot discover and/or formulate one’s ideals unless one finds them in the curriculum they study. Surely Hamm does not imagine teachers can anticipate what their students will need or want to study (“some vague idea and curiosity” is Hamm’s phrasing: p. 98) in order to find-formulate their ideals; student choice (to some extent) would seem to be a prerequisite.

³⁴ Hamm 1982, 99.

³⁵ Hamm 1982, 99.

³⁶ Hamm 1982, 99.

³⁷ Pinar 2017.

³⁸ Fromm 1941.

³⁹ Hamm 1982, 102-103.

⁴⁰ Ravitch (2021, January 14, 36) reports that the Trump Administration used the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP), part of the CARES Act passed by the U.S. Congress in March 2020, to address the coronavirus pandemic economic crisis. It

was supposed to rescue small businesses at risk of bankruptcy, but – under DeVos’ leadership - thousands of charter, private, and religious schools received an average of about \$855,000 each, compared with about \$134,500 per public school through CARES. Religious schools of every denomination, elite private schools, and more than one thousand charter schools received anywhere from \$150,000 to \$10 million each, Ravitch reports, adding: “The Paycheck Protection Program turned out to be a multibillion-dollar bonanza for non-public and religious schools, at a time when most public schools lacked the funding to pay for social distancing, health measures, and personal protection equipment for students and staff.”

⁴¹ Ravitch 2021, January 14, 36. During the pandemic but many home-bound (white) parents – especially women who were forced to drop out of the workforce to attend to their online-learning children – were eager for public schools to reopen; Black and Latino parents, however, not so much: Shapiro, Green, Kim 2021, February 2, A20. For an abbreviated history of school reform in the US, see Pinar 2019.