

Response to Chie Takekoshi's Paper 'British Tutorials and Japanese Seminars: Approaches to Students' Development in Historical Perspective'

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The response to Chie Takekoshi's paper will be in three parts commenting on: the context, philosophical concerns about the aims of education and, finally, some possible educational implications.

THE CONTEXT

It is always a challenge to be concise within a short paper when presenting an historical account. Takekoshi attempts to paint a historical landscape spanning different countries and cultural contexts, managing to briefly describing each. She manages to present interesting insight into the comparative influences of teaching and learning strategies in higher education in Japan and Britain, predominantly in the nineteenth century while also introducing a very interesting area for discussion.

As a respondent, the writer here does not presume specialist and comprehensive knowledge of the histories of all contexts presented in the paper. There are however, some questions that arise in light of justifications given for the tutorial teaching method. For the most part, I direct my response here to the context with which I am more familiar, the British tutorial.

Takekoshi has good reason to point to the nineteenth century for examining developments in higher education remarking 'that the educational reform in the 19th century is key for both countries' (Takekoshi, 2010). The overall effects of industrialisation on British society, the growth of towns and middle-class suburbs, changes in working conditions all marked a turning point for education by the nineteenth century, leading to the first Education Act of 1870. Until this point education was not available to all, reserved for those privileged in society and those able to afford it. This would have had an affect on those able to go on to higher education.

On the matter of privilege, when Takekoshi discusses the 'British tutorial', she is, in fact, referring to the more exclusive model of the Oxbridge tutorial and, 'the power of Oxbridge' (*ibid.*). It is widely known that those who attend elite universities of Oxford and Cambridge encounter a pedagogical style, such as the tutorial, which is not universally experienced by university students in Britain. According to Oxford University the faculty/student ratio is approximately 1:4.¹ This figure will, undoubtedly, contribute more significantly to the learning experience encountered. It is also a very exclusive form of pedagogy. Perhaps it would be useful to also consider other contemporary contexts of higher education institutions, in Britain, as well as the exclusive Oxbridge universities for the purpose of pursuing the arguments about

approaches to student development. The Oxbridge example could, thus, be suitably enriched with examples of other university practice, where the tutorial is one of many ways of instruction to encourage and cultivate independent learning and research.

However, where the Oxbridge tutorial is concerned, Paul Ashwin presents very interesting findings from his research carried out on the experiences of the 'Oxford tutorial'. Ashwin's research focuses on the students' experiences of the tutorial and I believe Takekoshi's arguments can be helped further by this research. Ashwin's study of students' conceptions of academic tasks of learning claims to address a, 'paucity of research into the Oxbridge tutorial systems ... where they have largely been considered from the perspective of those who teach, rather than those who learn, within that system'.²

Essentially, Ashwin's findings reinforce and conclude with the notion that students with a more sophisticated conception of the tutorial were,

more likely to perceive their learning environment as supportive, engage in a higher quality learning. This suggests that students' conceptions of tutorials, that is their understanding of the academic task undertaken as part of the tutorial system, is related to their successful engagement in the system (Ashwin, 2005, p. 642).

It may be said that Ashwin's research indicates a principle that may extend universally in terms of academic learning. A principle of 'successful engagement' may rely on the shared conception of what is valued or, as R. S. Peters explains that, 'the knowledge conditions ... not properly logical conditions of 'education' but contingent on our particular valuations' (Peters, 1975, p. 3).

The tensions, introduced in Takekoshi's paper, between different approaches in education regarding students' intellectual and emotional development as a result of the tutorial, suggest potentially deeper philosophical concerns intrinsic to the aims of education.

PHILOSOPHICAL CONCERNS ABOUT THE AIMS OF EDUCATION

Given a brief historical tradition, Takekoshi appears to consider the value of teaching and learning methods as depicted in the Socratic approach to teaching and learning. She contrasts, 'phase one' of the Socratic method, where a culture of learning has been cultivated with the potential to promote independent thought and personal autonomy; against a more authoritarian or paternalistic approach to learning—that of the student as a 'tabula rasa', or 'phase two' of the Socratic method (Takekoshi, 2010). These are familiar concerns in education and centre on what are considered to be, as R. S. Peters would describe, the 'particular valuations' of how education is best understood (Peters, 1975, p. 3). In other words, the value of the tutorials and the development of students are informed by what is valued and conceived to be the purpose of education.

R. S. Peters reminds us that the etymology of education has evolved and distinctions between training and education came to be made in the nineteenth century. Briefly, Peters highlights the distinctions that were embedded in ways in

which values were attributed to education as a process of acquiring skills, a process of instruction for betterment of job prospects, hence the value given to skills such as: literacy, numeracy, and an inheritance of instruction in institutions. According to Peters, when we begin to ask questions about the purpose of education and analyse what it is to be educated, we then enter into discussions about various ways in which to examine what is meant or understood by the value of the practice and the objectives. This extends beyond the process of instruction and is inclusive of the concept of the ideal of the 'all-round development' of the person. 'This ideal emerged into prominence when the importance of specialised knowledge became manifest in the nineteenth century' (p. 9).

Moreover the important point which Peters continues to state is that,

... it is one thing to argue that, because the concept of an educated man came into prominence at a certain time as an ideal, the value condition must necessarily be satisfied; but it is quite another matter to outline the precise ways in which such an outcome is valuable ... It could be argued that value must be ascribed to this because the capacity for appreciating activities in this way is central to being on the inside of them and doing them for their own sake (p. 10).

Here is where, I believe, Takekoshi, can expand and give justifications for the value of the tutorial, as she conceives it. She presents an argument that the tutorial has evolved out of a tradition and has been valued for political purposes of either intellectual autonomy and freedom or intellectual rigidity and suppression. But it seems there would be more to say of the ethical discussion of the content of what is valuable to the tutorial.

I draw heavily from R. S. Peter's analytical philosophical tradition, in my response, because he draws both from historical and philosophical perspectives that give clarity to approaches in discussing the issues which Takekoshi introduces. Peters elaborates on how there may be degrees of satisfaction in learning premised on a Socratic conception of 'knowledge of the good', and which, as Peters explains, if this were true then:

... the valuative aspect also of 'being educated' would be dependent upon a knowledge condition, though the knowledge would be of a different type from that involved in depth and breadth of understanding ... As Socrates pointed out, in his answer to Thrasymachus, anyone who is skilled in anything has regard for the standards which are constitutive of excellence in his art. He does not just know about them; he also cares about them and is committed to them ... (*ibid.*).

Considerations to the value and the ethical discussions of the tutorial can enrich discussions about what should be happening in higher education more generally. Thus, informing practice and generating better understanding in the pursuit and engagement in academic tasks of learning given what is understood by the purpose of education or, 'the processes of education as those that are involved in the development of an educated person' (p. 13).

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION LEARNING PRACTICES

Given what has been discussed, both historically and philosophically, the question remains about how to pursue the value of what is considered the purpose of education and, more specifically, the tutorial method as a system to engage in.

At this point, the suggestion of the respondent here is for further consideration and expansion on what is understood to be the importance of the instruction but also the intrinsic value attributed, if at all, to the tutorial.

Clearly, there is much to gain from the traditions and cultural perspectives, but what can be learnt from the experience and what is more desirable as an educational aim for the development of the 'educated person'? There may be more to say about the roles of the tutor and the student in the tutorial, if this is the ideal, given what has been learnt from: the Socratic method of dialogue, historical aims of education and from more recent experiences of the tutorial as indicated by Ashwin's study.

Takekoshi's mention of the 'unity of research and education' is fascinating to the discussion of the tutorial. This may be a possible future orientation to how students may experience 'successful engagement' in a more 'sophisticated conception' of the tutorial. But more needs to be done on this.

My own experience of teaching Japanese university students in a different context of exploring the notion of International Citizenship, has revealed that there is great value to be given in allowing students to openly question and examine how to engage with issues and concerns. This has been attested by students' own admissions who, when given the opportunity to openly examine issues in an environment that encourages open engagement, claimed to experience more intrinsic value in the academic tasks and consultative nature of discussions. They also claimed that they had discovered latent potential about their own capacities for understanding.³

Finally, and to conclude, as the respondent to Takekoshi's paper, I am grateful for the opportunity to engage with an alternative discipline. Takekoshi's comparative look at education introduces much food for thought and deserves further study. The paper invites a potentially rich discussion for anyone currently engaged in higher education or with an interest to examine issues fundamental to educational policy and practice.

NOTES

1 <http://www.apu.edu/oxford/tutorials/>.

2 <http://www.springerlink.com/content/y148u0276216226x/fulltext.pdf>.

3 I have written on this elsewhere, where I discuss the educative environment where open and interactive engagement is encouraged for the purpose of acquiring deeper understanding and appreciation for different perspectives (Golmohamad, 2008).

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