Book Review

Teaching for Dissent

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In Teaching for Dissent, Sarah Stitzlein argues that not only is American society obliged to include the concept of dissent in the educational curriculum, but that pragmatist doctrines provide encouraging rationale for its practice. When we think of dissent and education, they are usually at odds; images of student protests or a recalcitrant pupil are likely foremost in our minds. As the father of a rambunctious toddler, I am not so sure that teaching for dissent is high on my list of preferred preschool activities, but there is something to be said for making citizens aware of their right and democratic duty to voice opposition. Stitzlein is making the case that it is a civic obligation to practice dissent and that its necessity warrants classroom time amongst the competing interests of achievement test preparation and the objectives of a well-rounded education.

The justification for teaching for dissent is especially American; the Founders supported it (for the educated elite) and the pragmatists showed how it could be done a century ago. Do we still have the same type of dissent in mind today? Stitzlein recognizes that the angry debate between political parties provides the popular conception of dissent, but she is promoting a return to the ideal of the political philosophers like Jefferson and Paine. It is not just a valuable activity, she says, contrasting the way “dissent is [currently] understood as a negative right—a freedom to be engaged without government intervention—[while proposing] instead that dissent should be seen as a positive right—a freedom that requires certain governmental supports.”¹ The main issue that her thesis must (and to some extent does) confront is a shift in our educational priorities to return to a liberal arts perspective. This is no small task in the era of No Child Left Behind and Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) approaches to education, but there is precedent for looking to better options in the classroom.²

The book starts its argument at the time of the American Revolution, crediting Jefferson as the force behind the end of censorship in schools: “[Jefferson] believed that if schools were going to teach children to support good governments or dissent against bad ones, the government should not be able to control what information was being taught to students because it could bias them, thereby making their
consent illegitimate.” The Progressive era pragmatists “enhanced” dissent with their focus on the inquiry, questioning, and experimentation necessary to solve social problems in the dialogue of democracy, yet they also fell short of developing a unified and sustainable praxis of dissent.

Defining dissent can be a contested affair. Its manifestation can fall along a spectrum from a polite difference of opinion to an impassioned challenge on the theoretical level or from civil disobedience to armed conflict on the practical level. Stitzlein works through various conceptions of dissent, culling out some of the negative connotations to arrive at a notion of effective dissent. “Good dissenters” are intellectual, practice moral sensitivity, and embody the pragmatist spirit as connected to certain dispositions in the form of Deweyan democratic habits.

After going a bit further into the transformation of dissent from a negative to a positive right in chapter 4, the theme then requires that we envision teaching for dissent as a way to guarantee that we are progressively seeking what our government owes us, in contradistinction from the notion of dissent as a means of stopping the government from violating our fundamental rights. This shift in perspective is a logical puzzle, however; how would we frame issues as opportunities for positive dissent without having to invoke challenges to the status quo and thus work from a reactionary position? A neopragmatist approach might help here if we link the positive right of dissent with the liberal idea of social progress, that is, lessening cruelty in the world. Then we can see dissent as an open-ended practice where the objective is not so much to eradicate a specific condition as it is to refuse to accept the current conditions as satisfactory. Thus dissent as a positive right could be understood as part of our citizenship education alongside the American political tradition and the faltering expectation that each successive generation will have it better than their parents.

A classical pragmatist would likely be sympathetic to the argument that dissent has a place in schools. A neopragmatist’s linguistic cynicism regarding the very concept of dissent being effective in our politically contested education discourse should be tempered by the social hope that we can realize a better democracy through such discourse and that citizen education is the place where it will happen. Such optimism is discussed in chapter 7 (co-authored with Carrie Nolan) as part of the cultivation of dissent in students. This is another of those unfortunate instances where the terminology undermines the point being made: “Cultivating dissent” sounds a lot like sowing the seeds of discontent, an offense that most school principals would award with expulsion rather than an “A” in Civics. One can only imagine the apoplectic response of a school board when such charges are levied against a teacher!

The book also equates dissent with political activism in a way that does not include other trajectories of dissent, such as economic or social activism. Stitzlein would imply that all dissent in civil society, especially if we propose to instruct our
young citizens how to practice it in a democracy, is eventually political. But our discourse is not universally political; in fact, one might argue that economic activism is more dominant and explains a lot more of the social disparities that inform our politics. It is chicken or egg, perhaps, but imagining how we educate citizens for economic activism is not very far-fetched. Actions taken since the Great Recession, such as establishing the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and the ongoing “Occupy” movements, show that activism has potentially more momentum on this front than it does in trying to convince politicians and citizens that the teachers can meet the Common Core and train a cohort of conscientious objectors. Given the mixed reactions to Army private Manning’s fate and the status of Edward Snowden in the age of WikiLeaks, it is perhaps hard to believe that schools could figure out an acceptable approach to teaching for dissent.

This potential objection aside, Stitzlein does provide ideas about the “how” of teaching for dissent without getting too tangled in the machinations of the very politics that would need to exist to help the citizens digest the “why.” The popular TV-series *House of Cards* and the frustrations with injustice portrayed by Sunday morning pundits would have us think that what is right or possible has nothing to do with the outcomes of political activism. In the practical—but not pragmatist—sense, teaching for dissent seems a radical and unlikely addition to the education program as driven by the state. But if the socio-political establishment cannot stomach a module on dissent in the taxpayer-funded curriculum, there may yet be other ways to teach for dissent as Stitzlein desires. The aforementioned MOOCs that are causing administrators no shortage of worry over the fate of the traditional education model may come to the pragmatist’s aid. Since teaching for dissent seems to have underlying liberal—if not anti-capitalist—leanings, then widespread and free access to lessons on dissent could be developed with MOOCs. This would take advantage of the medium that has proven so effective for dissent in practice, such as the Twittering of the Syrian uprising and Facebook-driven political opposition in the United States. Stitzlein does discuss how teachers practice dissent online, most often in the anonymous realm of blogs and forums that foment criticism of the education system itself.

There is the briefest mention of the legitimacy of government hinging on the consent of the governed that could play with the con/dis-sent derivations; yet Stitzlein wants to keep the violent protest forms of dissent (as a means to undermine government authority) away from the schoolhouse. This is a prudent position when teaching for dissent in a unit in eighth grade social studies, yet the modest thesis seems to disenfranchise the power and social value of full-fledged student demonstrations led by the tweed-coated faculty. There is probably more to be gained from C. Wright Mills than John Stuart Mill when trying to convince contemporary American society that our liberty depends on teaching for dissent.

There is much to contemplate in *Teaching for Dissent* if one steps back from the cacophony of our education debates and recognizes that our core political values
are rooted in dissent and that it should be taught in school. The pragmatist ideal is a well-educated citizenry that practices democratic discourse and looks for better outcomes. The ugly reality is that we cannot agree on a national standard of achievement in the subjects that the politicians do care about, like reading and math, so cultivating dissent in the curriculum seems like it will remain a luxury of the private liberal arts college. If we are satisfied that the mantle of dissent is adequately carried by such intellectual elites, then carry on. Yet it appears that Stitzlein is asking for a more elementary approach to dissent that will require a lot more consent.

REFERENCES


NOTES

1. Stitzlein, Teaching for Dissent, 2.
3. Ibid., 23.
4. Ibid., 42.
5. Ibid., 50.
6. Ibid., 62.
11. Stitzlein, Teaching for Dissent, 128.
12. Ibid., 98.

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