# Practical Reasons for Learning: The Missing Key to School Education

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**Abstract:** My aim is to demonstrate the adverse effect of value-neutral pedagogy on student learning. Values furnish practical reasons that frame learners' acquisition of instructive information to guide their conduct. Hence, a value-neutral school curriculum impairs students' use of practical reasons for learning. Instead of helping students acquire knowledge to achieve new goals, value-neutral pedagogy encourages them to assimilate new information to their prior knowledge and expectations. The inevitable result is that students' motivation to learn is undermined and their understanding of the curriculum impoverished. In alignment with teacher professionalism, the autonomy of teachers to situate value-neutral curriculum within the values that characterize students' lives enhances student understanding of the practical and social importance of academic study and preempts the dreaded question: "Why do we have to learn this?"

> Our Business here is not to know all things, but those things which concern our conduct.
> — John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*[1]

During the first half of the 20th century, our nationwide school system gradually consolidated as an institutional framework for providing children with formal education. The professionalization and bureaucratization of children's schooling set their formal education apart from their informal education at home and in the community. Seeking to secure the academic credibility of the new system and their own professional authority, leading educators were inspired by the Positivist dichotomy between objective knowledge and subjective values. They came to believe that the ideal school education centered on teaching students value-neutral, evidence-based factual knowledge.

During the later part of the century, it became apparent that the teaching of facts encouraged rote learning that failed to prepare students for college, career, and informed participation in civic life. To enhance students' academic proficiency, professional educators devised student-centered curricula that more fully engaged students' cognitive abilities. The teaching of facts was accordingly augmented by pedagogical reforms recommending students' active participation in knowledge construction; teaching students critical thinking skill and metacognitive strategies; and organizing content knowledge around subject-area core concepts and ideas. By focusing on the cognitive aspects of student learning, professional educators could remain committed to the ideal of value-neutral pedagogy.

Longitudinal assessments of preK-12 students' academic achievements, showing minuscule progress in students' scores since the early 2000s, call into doubt the success of these pedagogical reforms.[2] My aim in what follows is to demonstrate the adverse effect of value-neutral pedagogy on student learning. Following in the footsteps of John Locke and his practical perspective on the quest for knowledge, my argument is that values furnish the practical reasons that guide learners' acquisition of instructive information to guide their conduct. Hence, a value-neutral school curriculum impairs students' use of practical reasons for learning. Instead of

[1] (1975/1689). Peter H. Nidditch (Ed.), Oxford University Press, 46
[2] National Assessment of Educational Progress (2024). The Nation's Report Card. https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/

helping students acquire knowledge to achieve new goals, value-neutral pedagogy encourages them to assimilate new information to their prior knowledge and expectations. The inevitable result is that students' motivation to learn is undermined and their understanding of the curriculum is impoverished.

## How Practical Reasons Guide Learning

The idea of value-neutral knowledge assumes that knowledge is an end for itself, rather than a means to an end that derives from learners' values.[3] Considered, however, in the broader context of the biological evolution of cognition, that assumption appears erroneous. Animals are affected by a myriad of surrounding conditions, yet the information they acquire is sufficiently discriminative and instructive to stimulate specific behaviors such as mate selection, foraging for food, navigation, and avoiding predators. Thus, an animal does not perceive objects and events in the world in and of themselves. Rather, its brain responds to external and internal biochemical signals in ways that promote its survival. 'Knowledge for the sake of knowledge' is a value, at best, rarely acted upon by any species.[4]

Human beings learn for innumerable practical purposes that derive from a wide range of cultural values. Motivated by practical reasons, they search for and acquire instructive information to guide their behavior. But can humans circumvent their biological limitations and cultural habits, set aside their values, and learn solely for the sake of gaining true or objective knowledge? Unlikely. Reflecting on scientific discovery, Karl Popper points out that even the most rigorous inquiry presupposes practical considerations: "Observation is always selective. It needs a chosen object, a definite task, an interest, a point of view, a problem. And its description presupposes a descriptive language, with property words." The meaning of property words, "presupposes similarity and classification, which in its turn presupposes interests, points of view, and problems." Whatever the learner perceives, "can be classified, and can become similar or dissimilar, *only* in this way — by being related to needs and interests."[5] It follows from Popper's analysis that the deliberate acquisition and processing of information, as well as its linguistic articulation, presuppose practical reasoning. A rational person learns for a purpose and gains knowledge they can rely on to achieve it. Knowledge is meant to be instructive, to provide a road map for action, and is, therefore, a means to an end.

## The Practical Nature of Student Social Learning

Social learning from others plays a vital role in the cultural development of humans as well as in the development of human cultures.[6] In contrast with individual learning, social learning is

[3] Putnam, H. (2002). *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays*. Harvard University Press; Raz, J. (2009). "Reasons: Practical and Adaptive", in D. Sobel & S. Wall (Eds.), *Reasons for Action*. Cambridge University Press, 37-57.

[4] Shettleworth, S. J. (2010). *Cognition, Evolution, and Behavior.* Oxford University Press. Consider Franny Glass' comment to her brother Zooey in J.D. Salinger's (1961, 61) *Franny and Zooey* (Little, Brown and Company). After enduring days of relentless academization on a visit to her boyfriend who was away at college, an exhausted Franny grumbles: "I think that knowledge — when it's knowledge for knowledge's sake, anyway — is the worst of all."

[5] Popper, K. R. (1972). *Conjectures and Refutations. The Growth of Scientific Knowledge.* Routledge and Kegan Paul, 46-7. Italics in the original.

[6] Boyd, R., P. J. Richerson, J. Henrich (2011). "The cultural niche: why social learning is essential for human adaptation". Proceedings of the National. Academy of Science U.S.A. Supplement 2, 10918-25.

the result of a learner attending to another individual's behavior, its effects, or products.[7] What makes social learning a crucial factor in human development is its practical nature: it enables individuals to build on the achievements of others and, thereby, to generate a social repository of skill selected for demonstrated capacity to contribute to personal and societal well-being.

In the academic classroom, the principal objects of student social learning are achievements of science, the humanities, and language arts. These achievements provide students with information about real or imaginary situations that embody use of conceptual tools to achieve culturally valuable goals. To benefit from this information, students need to identify and learn to use the tools it provides to achieve goals that contribute positively to their personal development or social circumstances. Hence, students' understanding of curricular materials is inseparable from their ability to appreciate the value of the curriculum they study.

School-age children are highly experienced social learners,[8] but understanding the achievements of science, the humanities, and language arts in the academic setting of the school is an unfamiliar challenge for most students. At home and in the community, children's social learning often serves purposes that are far more tangible, immediate, and concrete than the social learning of a poem, a scientific theory, or a historical analysis. Furthermore, outside the school environment, children often engage in social learning in the presence of familiar role models by observing their actions and listening to their instructions. At school, by contrast, social learning is predominantly mediated by reading relatively impersonal texts that are completely removed from the context in which they were originally produced. Students' academic success depends, therefore, on a pedagogy that helps them apply their skill as social learners to understand how the cultural products in the curriculum are designed to serve valuable purposes. Value-neutral pedagogy conflicts with the rationale for social learning in the academic classroom by creating social distance between students and what they study.

## How Value-Neutral Pedagogy Undermines Students' Social Learning

Reading is a foundational skill students acquire at school. For this reason, the most adverse effect of value-neutral pedagogy on students' academic learning pertains to reading comprehension instruction. Students are highly accustomed to using speech as a means of interpersonal communication and social interaction. They intuitively know their social relationships are shaped by how they and the people they interact with use language. They understand — perhaps only implicitly — that a spoken message is composed with the intention to motivate the person receiving it to act in accordance with its content.[9]

In contrast with students' verbal communication experience, reading pedagogy abstracts away the function of the text as a means of communication and social interaction and, thereby, disregards the practical reasons for producing the text and for reading it. Reading comprehension becomes an end for itself, defined by reading specialists as ''the process of simultaneously constructing and extracting meaning through interaction and engagement with print."[10] The pedagogical construal of the meaning of a text relies on a psychological model of perception that

[7] Schaik, V. C. (2010). "Social learning and culture in animals". In: P. Kappeler (Ed.) *Animal Behaviour: Evolution and Mechanisms*. Springer, 623–653.
[8] Rogoff, B. (2003). *The Cultural Nature of Human Development.* Oxford University Press.
[9] Grice, P. (1989). *Studies in the Way of Words.* Harvard University Press.
[10] RAND Reading Study Group (RRSG) (2002). Toward an R&D program in reading comprehension. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.

combines "bottom-up" perception of sensory input with "top-down" integration of sensory information with prior knowledge. The product of reading comprehension, accordingly, is a mental representation of a real or imaginary situation which the reader constructs based on textual information and their background knowledge.[11] As an illustration, Catherine Snow proposes an elementary school student would demonstrate an adequate comprehension of the statement, "Alex and Ali ran to the swings and jumped on", by constructing a representation of "two individuals moving quickly toward and using some playground equipment".[12] The implication of Snow's illustration is that students need not consider the context in which a text is meant to engage them, as readers, in purposeful social interaction. All they need do to comprehend a statement is to assume the role of disengaged spectators of an imaginary situation that corresponds to the linguistic information they process. However, social disengagement defeats the purpose of social learning.

To enable them to achieve comprehension of what they read, students need to understand the purpose for which a text is intended, not only construct an image of what the text (re)presents. For example, Aesop's celebrated fable, *The Fox and the Grapes*,[13] is intended to motivate the reader to reflect on the psychological phenomenon of people disparaging goals they cannot attain. But elementary school students will fail to learn the lesson which Aesop's story aims to teach if they strictly follow reading comprehension instruction and confine themselves to constructing a mental representation of the fox' behavior. They will apply their background knowledge of foxes or other animals to render the text meaningful to them but will remain oblivious to the lesson that the fable is meant to teach. As Aesop's fable illustrates, the fictional world depicted by a literary text has useful cognitive content: it conveys an imaginary situation that provides readers with the conceptual means to reflect from a new perspective on their own behaviors and the world in which they live, or to gain new insights into social situations and problems. Any pedagogy that confines the meaning of art to a representation of a fictitious situation discards the art's cultural value and, thereby, its educational value to students. And students' failure to adequately understand the fable is likely to hinder their ability to understand more complex literary works in the future.

Student acquisition of content knowledge in science and social studies is similarly impoverished by a pedagogy that disregards the purpose it is intended to serve. To enhance students' academic proficiency, educators have proposed to model student learning after experts' use of concepts to organize information for effective interpretation, retrieval, and application. Experts, of course, develop and use conceptual tools in accordance with their professional interests. Their reasons for organizing information in one way rather than another are practical. Yet, major educational programs disregard the practical rationale behind conceptual knowledge.[14] For example, Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), a multi-state program of science education for the K-12 school system, shifts the centerpiece of student learning from emphasis on empirical facts to Disciplinary Core Ideas (DCI). But NGSS content standards present DCI as statements of fact. A fifth-grade standard for learning the idea of "the

[11] Kintsch, W., & Rawson, K. A. (2005). Comprehension. In M. J. Snowling & C. Hulme (Eds.), *The Science of Reading: A Handbook* (209–226). Blackwell Publishing.
[12] Snow, C.E. (2010). "Reading Comprehension: Reading for Learning". *International Encyclopedia of Education*, vol. 5, 413-418.
[13] https://read.gov/aesop/005.html
[14] Donovan, M. S. and J. D. Bransford (Eds). (2005). *How Students Learn: Science in the Classroom.* Committee on How People Learn: A Targeted Report for Teachers, National Research Council. National Academies Press, 7.

gravitational force of Earth" states that "Earth acting on an object near Earth's surface pulls that object toward the planet's center."[15]

The scientific concept of gravitational force was a product of Isaac Newton's endeavor to develop a quantitative universal theory to explain why and how inertial objects change their velocity or the direction of their movement. The escalation of objects moving toward Earth was the reason for using the idea of gravitational force as an explanation. The NGSS version of this concept, however, omits information about its scientific value and purpose. Oblivious to the meaning of the concept as an explanatory tool, students are likely to interpret its factual content by assimilation to what they consider the most relevant knowledge and experience. They may think, perhaps, that Earth pulls objects near its surface in a manner analogous to the way a truck pulls a cart. They may think that Earth pulls only objects near its surface, rather than other planets or the moon, because the latter are perhaps too remote from Earth, or too heavy or large to be pulled by it. Or they may just realize that they do not know how to understand the fact and confine themselves to memorizing it for an upcoming test. Thus, by delimiting the content of scientific ideas to factual information, the proposed standard defeats the purpose of social learning in the science classroom — namely, to learn from scientists how their research interests guide their understanding of the physical world.

## Concluding Thoughts

Professional educators hinder the development of students' reading comprehension and academic learning by advancing pedagogical programs that erroneously assume that information processing is value-neutral and, therefore, does not require practical reasoning. Humans learn by acquiring and interpreting sensory information to achieve new goals. When the processing of new data is not guided by a purpose, the data are assimilated by default to background knowledge and beliefs, and learning is minimal.

In the context of social learning, a learner's purpose is modeled after the purpose served by the actions and achievements of the person they learn from. Professional educators are obviously aware of the cultural value of the achievements of science, the humanities, and language arts that are included in the school curriculum. Nevertheless, their pedagogical programs and strategies assume a value-neutral stance towards content knowledge that defeats the purpose of social learning. Such value-neutral programs do not adequately teach students how to achieve the goals which the products of science, the humanities, and language arts enable educated people to achieve. Instead, they encourage students to assimilate new information to the knowledge and experience they bring to the classroom. As a result, students' understanding of content knowledge is impoverished, and their ability to build on it in the next stages of their schooling is undermined. Moreover, students' motivation to engage with academic life diminishes, and they become alienated from the academic culture that school education represents.

Value-neutral education is philosophically and pedagogically flawed. But it is ethically and politically questionable as well. In a liberal democratic society, individuals have the right to choose their values and the political views these values inform. A value-neutral pedagogy allegedly immunizes the academic classroom from political pressures that stakeholders in public education may want to exercise. However, a value-neutral education does not square with the responsibility of professional educators to advance students' abilities to promote their well-being

[15] https://www.nextgenscience.org/pe/5-ps2-1-motion-and-stability-forces-and-interactions.

as individuals and members of society. Almost certainly, the big business of building curriculum will continue to develop generalized, academic materials at a distance from the specific contexts of instruction in which they will be implemented. Therefore, the professional responsibilities of teachers, who do encounter students in real time in the real educational spaces of local learning environments, need to be reconstructed to include adaptation of curriculum to the practical learning needs and value interests of students in classes. Teacher autonomy of this type is likely our best hope that students from all sorts of social circumstances will learn the curriculum well by connecting the value of academic learning to their everyday lives. Professionalization of teaching may usefully be re-envisioned to reach beyond value-neutral bureaucratization of schooling to include an adhocratic element that, literally, adds *value* to lesson plans, pedagogical actions, and student learning