



Menu

Home About us Advertise Worksheets Archives Category ▾ Subscribe E-magazine Contact Us Web Exclusives

Search Articles... Se:

# The limits of individual autonomy

Prakash Iyer

I have been discomfited all day after this conversation with Anubhuti. We were discussing the process of learning and how concepts are formed in a child's mind. She said, "Well we cannot say concepts are formed by a child; we create them in a child's mind." Before I could object, she clarified that it is possible children go through the process of learning concepts on their own, but we initiate the process by putting thought in their minds with the intelligent (even manipulative) pedagogical methods we employ. Moreover, the environment we provide in a classroom, the experiences we lead them to, one innocuous word we say, questions we ask...all this leads them to think in a certain manner. Forming concepts is not an original or creative enterprise you know. Absolute individual autonomy is a myth that we adults invent in order to feel good about ourselves. Finally it is all indoctrination! They are learning what we want them to learn. They are thinking the way we want them to think.

Aarghh! I knew she was not saying it in jest or frustration. She said it as a matter of fact and that shook me up quite a bit. Is this true? Are we fooling ourselves with all these great words like critical thinking, independent judgment, self-direction? Are we leading children to think in a predetermined manner all the time?

Actually, it is not untrue. We spend so much time and effort building a curriculum. We also create extra-curricular activities to emphasize the importance of the predetermined curriculum. We are very careful and wary of "wrong answers". We want them to take their own decisions, make their own choices, but we adults always have a sense for the choices that are acceptable and we would like them to make choices in a certain manner, following some predetermined ways of thinking. With all subjects, we are not only particular about answers, we are demanding with the methods too. To justify all this, we come up with profound reasons for a predetermined curriculum. Children need to be prepared for adult life. Of course, who else would know adult life better than us adults! In a way aren't we making them dependent on us, rather than autonomous?

### What do we mean by autonomy?

I don't like this! So let me start from the beginning with a calm mind. I should first try and understand what autonomy means, so I can decide if it is indeed real or a myth. The word merely says, "having one's own laws", but there is more to the concept of autonomy than the word conveys. This paper written by Dearden (see References) which I read a while ago offers a definition of autonomy: "A person is autonomous, [then], to the degree that what he thinks and does in important areas of his life cannot be explained without reference to his own activity of mind."

Hey, this is not a simple definition. It has so many elements to it. First of all he says autonomy is in *degrees*. It is not an absolute concept that is either present or absent. It is less, more, a little more, then some more and so on.

Secondly he applies a limiting condition, "thinks and does in important areas of one's life". How do we decide importance? There is no standard definition of importance because it is subjective. What is important for me may not be important for you. So with some things I would insist on deciding myself, whereas for the same thing you might be alright with me deciding for you. But broadly we have a general sense for important areas of life. So is maths important? Yes, for everyone. Is social science important for everyone too? Of course...whew! Our curriculum is saved.

### Archives

- » ► 2022
- » ► 2021
- » ▼ 2020
  - » December
  - » November
  - » October
  - » September
  - » August
  - » July
  - » June
  - » April
  - » March
  - » February
  - » January
- » ► 2019
- » ► 2018
- » ► 2017
- » ► 2016
- » ► 2015
- » ► 2014
- » ► 2013
- » ► 2012
- » ► 2011
- » ► 2010
- » ► 2009



The tricky part is this seemingly confusing phrase, “cannot be explained without reference to his own activity of mind”. Double negative! Why? He could have said, “can be explained with reference...” Hey no! Hold on. There is a reason why he says it in this manner. He wants to describe this as a necessary condition. If the activity of mind is not “my own” he says it is not autonomy. Aaah! The activity should be my own, so if I move along each step of a standard process of say maths and I accept each step, then it becomes my own. I have owned each step of the process. Why would I own it? What if a child owns it out of fear for the teacher? What if it is love and respect for her? Would these be her own reasons for accepting the procedure of addition of three digit numbers?

No, this is when Dearden introduces another condition: Truth. Each step of the learning, reasons why a student agrees with the step should conform to the condition of Truth. So if I say, you need to add the two unit digits and if the result is a two digit number, you should “carry over” the first digit, how will a child consider the truth of this procedure and accept it as her own? She would not be able to judge if this is true, moreover she cannot depend on the authority of the person saying it. Well, even most adults find it difficult to make a judgment of this kind.

#### Testimonial knowledge

If a child encountered this in a kind form from a loving teacher, we would politely call it “testimonial knowledge”. Testimony! That which comes to us from another person; in this case a person who knows it all – the teacher. The child is dependent on the teacher to receive truth. Then this is only information, not knowledge. This information is accepted “autonomously” by the child not out of fear or love, but fortified by respect for authority. This is not very different from how we accept a good doctor’s diagnosis of our health. We are OK with the bizarre assumption that another person, a doctor, knows our body more than us. What is mere arithmetic in comparison to our body and health!

So testimonial knowledge defines the limit of individual autonomy! Knowledge through testimony of a dependable authority, is in a way “good dependence”, but this goodness and dependability of a teacher’s authority comes with two conditions: fidelity to Truth, and conveying it in a manner that does not base itself on fear or love or power. We teachers then have to put all the effort required to maintain fidelity to Truth, and we have to ensure it is conveyed without an element of fear or love which could compromise or even corrupt the reason why a child accepts and owns the Truth. To maintain fidelity to Truth, we have to put all the effort to ensure we are up-to-date with the knowledge acquired by humanity so far. Allowing an element of fear or love into our manner of conveying Truth would move the act of teaching closer to indoctrination. This manner of testimony, devoid of fear or love, is then a necessary condition of good teaching. A child’s dependence on testimony is corrupted by both love and fear, and it would amount to manipulation; and compromising fidelity to Truth would amount to misinformation.

#### From heteronomy to autonomy

Are we giving up on autonomy altogether then? Actually no! Let Piaget explain. Dependence on testimony amounts to what Piaget terms heteronomy. He describes a movement from heteronomy to autonomy in a very interesting manner. He writes that, “autonomy follows upon heteronomy: the rule of a game appears to the child no longer as an external law, sacred in so far as it has been laid down by adults; but as the outcome of a free decision and worthy of respect in the measure that it has enlisted mutual consent.” Children move towards absolute autonomy from heteronomy. (This explains Dearden’s description of autonomy being a matter of degree.) In our initial years we accept information as Truth because it is sacred in so far as it is presented by adults. Eventually the acceptance because of sacredness, becomes mutual consent. This is the trajectory Piaget seems to indicate, which does not eschew testimonial knowledge. Dependence on testimony is accepted as a necessary stage all children have to go through to reach a higher degree of autonomy.

#### What does this mean to the aim of education?

Absolute autonomy is indeed a myth since knowledge acquisition is based on testimony. We cannot teach children to be absolutely autonomous; rather we should be teaching them to manage their dependence on testimonies. Goldberg articulately says that we ought to recognize “our ineliminable epistemic dependence on others.” He changes the aim of education from absolute autonomy to “equipping students to manage their dependence in a world in which dependence has a clear payoff (in the extension of knowledge each of us can acquire) but also exposes us to the threats of manipulation and misinformation.” Needless to say, this is a trajectory where the degree of dependence should be decreased over time, in line with cognitive maturity of the learners. Rather than concerning ourselves with absolute autonomy, which has become a slogan of sorts, we should worry about inadvertent manipulation we teachers could be guilty of.

Anubhuti, you are right. Absolute autonomy does seem to be a myth. Most formal knowledge is testimonial and we need to accept that, even if we employ it only in the form of triggering the process of thinking and reflection in a learner. But at the same time, we ought to be focusing on their dependence on testimony, so we move them closer to autonomy. Absolute autonomy is like a mirage that keeps going further away, the closer we think we are moving towards it.

**References**

1. "Autonomy and Education" by R. F. Dearden. (Chapter 25 of "Education and the Development of Reason" edited by R. F. Dearden, R. S. Peters and P. H. Hirst. Routledge 1972).
2. "Epistemic Dependence in Testimonial Belief, in the Classroom and Beyond" by Sanford Goldberg. (Journal of Philosophy of Education. Volume 47. Issue 2. May 2013).

The author teaches Philosophy of Education at Azim Premji University. He can be reached at [prakash.iyer@apu.edu.in](mailto:prakash.iyer@apu.edu.in).

 *Cogitations, October 2020*

---

**Leave a Reply**

Logged in as 21-07-20-012701. [Log out?](#)

Comment

Post Comment

---

**Contact**

Teacher Plus  
A15, Vikrampur  
Secunderabad  
Telangana 500 009  
India

[Subscribe](#)

**Teacherplus**

Copyright. All rights reserved. **Designed By Ochre media Pvt Ltd**