

What is it to think and practice educationally? The Three Elements Heuristic

John I'Anson and Alison Jasper

University of Stirling

The aim of this paper is to put theory to work so as to raise the question: what is it to think and practice educationally?

In recent times we have become so accustomed to seeing schools, colleges and universities positioned as sites for the promotion of policies ranging from health and wellbeing, equity and inclusion to employability, amongst much else, that to raise the question as to *what education consists in* might seem rather odd, and even misguided. This is in part because Anglo-American thinking about education has tended to position 'education' as a second order activity, playing second fiddle to - and being dependent upon - other subjects such as Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology, and History, rather than being conceived as a discipline in its own right (1). And so the current tendency to see education as a site for the promulgation of other-than-educational activities and purposes could be seen as being in line with this orientation.

Of course, the Anglo-American approach isn't the only approach to education: continental traditions of education(2), have instead tended to characterise 'Education' as a discipline in its own right, with its own characteristic matters of concern and associated modes of inquiry. So, in thinking about what the educational consists in, is it a simple choice between, on the one hand, education as instrumental, (the Anglo-American approach) or education as a specific discipline in its own right (the continental approach, broadly conceived)?

We argue that it is desirable to articulate *a middle way* to thinking and practising education in-between these alternatives, such that education has its own distinctive and characteristic concerns whilst drawing upon a broad range of disciplinary areas – as a subject that is fundamentally interdisciplinary in scope. This is to conceive disciplinarity in a way put forward by Doreen Massey (1999), as defined less by its borders *than by its relations to others*, deliberately multiplying these lines of connection. This is also to take up the question as to what an *educational milieu* might consist in, as articulated by Dewey (1948).

Here, 'the educational' is characterised less by appeal to specific disciplinary resources, traditions, or territories, than by the mode of its engagement with, and negotiation of, certain problematics and mysteries. In the light of this, one way of identifying 'the educational' is through identifying how this might guide action within a certain milieu.

Approached in this way, a key task becomes the identification, description and mobilisation of guides for action (heuristics) that might inform practices that are characterised as educational. One way of conceiving this is through the 'three elements

of education heuristic' (l'Anson and Jasper, 2017)(3), as involving the mutual interaction of the critical, ethical and experimental elements:

- (i) *The critical element* entails a willingness to question our own point of view as well as that of others; to this extent, this involves trying to make explicit where we stand through teasing out assumptions that might otherwise be invisible.
- (ii) *The ethical element* raises questions re. our responsibilities and obligations to other(s) given that we are deeply imbricated in webs of relations. These relations include our relations to other humans and broader planetary entanglements.
- (iii) *The experimental element* explores the implications of translating ideas and concepts into practice. It is often difficult to anticipate what will happen without actually trying something out. It is therefore necessary to look for opportunities to translate ideas into practice, to see what difference this might make, acknowledging how reality might 'talk back', and drawing conclusions in the light of this.

For something to be considered 'educational', it is necessary for each of these elements to be in dynamic interaction. Thus, the heuristic can be used a tool for inquiring into *the extent to which* a given initiative or policy imperative is 'educational' as such. So, for example, a policy such as *Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC)* (Scottish Government, 2012) can be analysed using the heuristic to determine the extent to which this is *educational* as such(4).

Beyond policy analysis, the heuristic has much broader applicability in regard to thinking through issues of educational practice and what makes research distinctively educational.

Notes

1. On the Anglo-American approach see the classic approach articulated by Hirst (2010) and overview, Standish (2007).
2. On 'continental' traditions of education: *Didaktik*, Hudson (2007); *Bildung*, Alves (2019); *Erziehung*, and overview, Biesta (2011).
3. The heuristic is also part of a broader project, with which the authors are currently engaged, which aims to articulate a poetics of education.
4. See l'Anson (2018) for an analysis of *GIRFEC* using the three elements heuristic.

References

Alves, A. 2019 'The German Tradition of Self-cultivation (*Bildung*) and its Historical Significance', *Educação & Realidade*, 44: 2. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1590/2175-623683003>

Biesta, G. 2011 'Disciplines and theory in the academic study of education: a comparative analysis of the Anglo-American and Continental construction of the field', *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 19(2), pp. 175-192.

Dewey, J. 1948 'Common Sense and Science: Their respective frames of reference', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 45: 8, pp. 197-208.

Hirst, P. 2010 'Liberal education and the nature of knowledge'. in R. Archambault (Ed.), *Philosophical analysis and education* (International library of the philosophy of education Volume 1) London: Taylor & Francis (Original work published 1968).

Hudson, B. 2007 'Comparing Different Traditions of Teaching and Learning: what can we learn about teaching and learning?', *European Educational Research Journal*, 6: 2, pp. 135-146.

l'Anson, J. & Jasper, A. E. 2017 *Schooling Indifference*, London and New York: Routledge.

Massey, D. 1999 'Negotiating Disciplinary Boundaries', *Current Sociology*, 47: 4, pp. 5-12.

l'Anson J. 2018 'Children's Rights', in: Bryce, T.G.K., Humes, W.M., Gillies, D., Kennedy, A. (Eds.), *Scottish Education*, 5th ed., Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Scottish Government 2012 *A Guide to Getting It Right for Every Child*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Standish, P. 2007 'Rival conceptions of the philosophy of education', *Ethics and Education*, 2: 2, pp. 159-171.