# Some Pitfalls When Discussing Education

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It seems extremely common for people to be certain of their beliefs on education, and yet there seems to be much disagreement over even basic ideas—with the result that the sole point of agreement is that education is still an unsolved problem. Education is certainly not unique in being a topic where everyone likes to hold an opinion and doggedly defend it. Indeed, most "soft" subjects (in contrast to the "hard" sciences) are in this reference class. What makes education popular and controversial to discuss, perhaps, is its universality (in that it is mandatory in many places, so almost everyone has experienced it), its supposed dysfunction (so that it is easy to complain about, make suggestions, and so on), its supposed effects on important aspects later in life, etc. Most discussions about education, however, are utterly disappointing, for they fail to transcend the narrow contexts of the participants' world-views. In fact, education (as an institution) has even been likened to religion by for instance Peter Thiel (Loeb, 2014):

> People thought they could only get saved by going to the Catholic church, just like people today believe that salvation involves getting a college diploma. And if you don't get a college diploma that you're going to go to hell.
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> [...]
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> The reform will come from outside the system and the question people always have is, 'What does the next education system look like? What will it be?' And I

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think, like what happened to the Catholic church post 1500, I think there isn't going to be a single new institution that will replace it. And this, of course, was the disturbing message of the 16th century was, the institution wasn't going to save you. You have to figure out how to save yourself. And in a similar way there's no education institution that will save you. Young people have to figure it out on your own. And that is the last thing anybody wants to hear.

It should be noted, though, that staying within a narrow context or world-view isn't necessarily a bad thing; for instance, that someone writes about education in the context of a specific place and time period does not say anything about the intellectual content of their writing. However, generalizing from small examples without sufficient evidence, being incapable of coherent thought, being so dogmatic as to be unable to see obvious holes in one's argumentation, or any combination of these makes one provincial, and is a bad thing. And, unfortunately, many discussions on education seem to fit this description. It is too easy to convince oneself that one knows anything useful, and to delude oneself into thinking one is making hard progress on educational thought. In truth, the landscape of the debate on education is so complicated that making any sort of general statement is nearly impossible.

Although the insights gained from the current exploration are intended to generalize to some extent to many discussions on education[1], the actual scope of this investigation is very narrow[2]. We shall look at discussions on education through Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970) and Paul Tough's *How Children Succeed* (Tough, 2012), and try to spot pitfalls in their approaches. There is nothing too logical about the choice of works, but between them they provide some variety: the former is theoretical, half a decade old, and written in the context of Latin America, while the latter is more practical, recent, and focused on US education. Despite the contrast between the two works, they both share the common goal of trying to talk about how best to teach. For Freire teaching ought to be accomplished

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[1]This is because, although we only examine a few works directly, the investigation is still the result of the impression from many other works.

[2]In other words, we do not claim *all* discussions on education have the same flaws, but only that they are present in the works examined here, and that they are also likely to be present in other works.

through a "dialogue" between the teacher and students, whereas Tough suggests to build character (which he claims is malleable). How do their arguments fare?

Freire is a particularly good example of poor reasoning and writing. The core problem with Freire is that his main point (that the teacher must be among the students and must not "oppress" them, that a "dialogue" between the teacher and students is ideal) is nice-sounding but fails to receive very much empirical justification. His framework of "humanization" and "dehumanization", "love", "the praxis", "the revolutionary", and so on and so forth is unnecessary to convey the thrust of his philosophy. Indeed, Freire mainly runs around in tautologies by defining his terms so as to make his arguments fit.[3] The most egregious example of this is when he defines "sadism" and "necrophilia"—and then labels "the oppressors" with these words. This is a striking case of the "motte-and-bailey doctrine", which was popularized by Scott Alexander of the blog Slate Star Codex. The phrase and its origin are explained by Alexander (Alexander, 2014):

> [There is] a field of desirable and economically productive land called a bailey, and a big ugly tower in the middle called the motte. If you were a medieval lord, you would do most of your economic activity in the bailey and get rich. If an enemy approached, you would retreat to the motte and rain down arrows on the enemy until they gave up and went away. Then you would go back to the bailey, which is the place you wanted to be all along.
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> So the motte-and-bailey doctrine is when you make a bold, controversial statement. Then when somebody challenges you, you claim you were just making an obvious, uncontroversial statement, so you are clearly right and they are silly for challenging you. Then when the argument is over you go back to making the bold, controversial statement.

Economist Bryan Caplan quotes philosopher John Searle in calling this "Moving from the

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[3]There is certainly nothing wrong with defining terms in itself; indeed, many subjects like mathematics would go nowhere without rigorous definitions. However, as shown below, Freire's definitions all seem unnecessary and are there chiefly to confuse.

preposterous to the platitudinous and then back to the preposterous" (Caplan, 2014). In the case of Freire, the "bold, controversial statement" is that "oppressors" are "necrophiles" and "sadists" (e.g. "Oppression—overwhelming control—is necrophilic." (Freire, 1970, p 77)). When anyone disputes this, Freire can safely return to his motte, namely the definition of sadism that he obtains from Erich Fromm (Freire, 1970, p 59):

> The pleasure in complete domination over another person (or other animate creature) is the very essence of the sadistic drive. Another way of formulating the same thought is to say that the aim of sadism is to transform a man into a thing, something animate into something inanimate, since by complete and absolute control the living loses one essential quality of life—freedom.

And with this, he can accuse the "oppressors" of "sadism" (Freire, 1970, p 59):

> Sadistic love is a perverted love—a love of death, not of life. One of the characteristics of the oppressor consciousness and its necrophilic view of the world is thus sadism.

Or again (right before his definition from Fromm) (Freire, 1970, p 59):

> This tendency of the oppressor consciousness to "in-animate" everything and everyone it encounters, in its eagerness to possess, unquestionably corresponds with a tendency to sadism.

Freire continues to fail to use commonsense definitions of words, by stating that the "oppressed" are incapable of initiating violence (Freire, 1970, p 55). His use of anaphora ("It is not ...") is also notably sentimental, so it is worth quoting at length:

> Violence is initiated by those who oppress, who exploit, who fail to recognize others as persons—not by those who are oppressed, exploited, and unrecognized. It is not the unloved who initiate disaffection, but those who cannot love because they love only themselves. It is not the helpless, subject to terror, who initiate

terror, but the violent, who with their power create the concrete situation which
begets the "rejects of life." It is not the tyrannized who initiate despotism, but
the tyrants. It is not the despised who initiate hatred, but those who despise. It
is not those whose humanity is denied them who negate humankind, but those
who denied that humanity (thus negating their own as well). Force is used not by
those who have become weak under the preponderance of the strong, but by the
strong who have emasculated them.

More succinctly, he states: "Never in history has violence been initiated by the oppressed."
But how can this be? Many historical examples of coups and acts of terror are initiated by
those with less power. We find, however, that this is because Freire has defined "oppression"
and "violence" to suit his arguments; his motte (Freire, 1970, p 55):

Any situation in which "A" objectively exploits "B" or hinders his and her pursuit
of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression. Such a situation
in itself constitutes violence, even when sweetened by false generosity, because
it interferes with the individual's ontological and historical vocation to be more
fully human. With the establishment of a relationship of oppression, violence has
already begun.

We might begin to wonder if Freire's flagship idea of a "dialogue" has merit. And even here,
we see this definition: "Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of
generating critical thinking." (Freire, 1970, p 92) In other words, dialogue implies critical
thinking (because dialogue requires critical thinking), and critical thinking implies dialogue
(because *only* dialogue is capable of critical thinking), i.e. dialogue and critical thinking are
one and the same. So "critical thinking" becomes Freire's motte: nobody wants to deny that
critical thinking is bad; therefore "dialogue" must be the answer to education, and hence we
must accept all of Freire's claims about the "dialogue".

Intellectual dishonesty through redefinition is bad enough, but Freire is also hypocritical.
For instance we see (Freire, 1970, p 92):

Finally, true dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking—thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them—thinking which perceives reality as a process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity [. . .].

For someone so inclined to construct dichotomies like "the oppressor" and "the oppressed"; "humanization" and "dehumanization"; "love" and "necrophilia"; and so on, we see now that he advocates instead for "an indivisible solidarity". But now, using his definition, we must conclude that he is not engaging in critical thinking (not that there is anything wrong with that).

Freire also seems too eager to put leftist extremists like Marx, Sartre, Che Guevara, Mao, and so on, in a positive light[4]. The clearest case of this is when Freire holds up Mao's Cultural Revolution in China as an example. Freire states (Freire, 1970, p 54):

The pedagogy of the oppressed, as a humanist and libertarian pedagogy, has two distinct stages. In the first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation. In both stages, it is always through action in depth that the culture of domination is culturally confronted.

Freire gives an example of this "humanist and libertarian pedagogy" that seeks "permanent liberation" in the footnote directly after the quote above: "This appears to be the fundamental aspect of Mao's Cultural Revolution." (Freire, 1970, p 54) If a theory of education cannot even exclude Mao's Cultural Revolution as erroneous, it is difficult to agree with it or even take it seriously. Indeed, the exclusion of absurd and fanatical regimes serves as a good litmus test of the viability of a theory. With a little bit of glee, we might even say that Freire's

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[4]For instance the introduction mentions "Freire's [. . .] enormous debt to [. . .] Marx [. . .] and Sartre among others" (Freire, 1970, p 25).

theory—that his brand of a "pedagogy of the oppressed" is ideal—is falsifiable, and, indeed, has been falsified by the very example he provides.

*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is fascinating because of its influence on subsequent thought, its historical context of being censored, and so on, but in terms of educational thought, it disappointingly falls into many traps. The complete certainty with which Freire writes, as well as his lack (or obfuscation) of common sense, ought to make one wary of trusting his claims. Indeed Freire also writes with universality, and yet provides little evidence throughout his work.

We turn now to Tough, who provides a journalistic narrative purportedly showing the importance of non-cognitive traits, which he calls "character". Whereas Freire writes with complete generality, to the point that readers not in the context of 20th century Latin America can scarcely understand him, Tough's writing is grounded in anecdotes. To his credit, Tough also references papers, but his treatment here seems lacking. Indeed, since anecdotes are so dominant throughout his book, we must be cognizant of (1) the availability heuristic[5]—both in the sense that Tough is susceptible to this type of thinking, and in the sense that readers, having these anecdotes related to them, will recall them later; (2) the problem of generalizing from a small number of examples[6]; and (3) the possibility that anecdotes may be chosen so as to support a claim (often called "cherry-picking")[7]. As a narrative strategy, anecdotes may prove useful, but it cannot suffice for answering the "big questions" Tough has, namely "Who succeeds and who fails? Why do some children thrive while others lose their way? And what can any of us do to steer an individual child—or a whole generation of children—away from

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[5]The availability heuristic essentially states that people tend to draw conclusions based on examples they can most easily recall.

[6]See for instance the quote "We only have direct first-person knowledge one one mind, one psyche, and one social circle, and we find it tempting to treat it as typical even in the face of contrary evidence.". (Alexander, 2009)

[7]Bryan Caplan explains this well in the context of people using "recent events" to support an argument: "The intellectually lazy masses have no patience for thoughtful arguments or big picture surveys of the evidence. So how are you supposed to persuade them of anything? Simple. Cast all epistemic scruples aside. Wait around for recent events to go your way. Then loudly claim that these events 'show' the very thing you've long yearned to make the masses believe." (Caplan, 2015)

failure and toward success?" (Tough, 2012, p 18)

And indeed, Tough does provide more than anecdotes, namely in the form of various experiments. However even here, the evidence (at least as discussed in the book) seems insufficient to make his claim that, for instance, "Parents and other caregivers who are able to form close, nurturing relationships with their children can foster resilience in them that protects them from many of the worst effects of a harsh early environment." (Tough, 2012, p 51) The most convincing evidence in this regard is Meany's experiments with rats, and whether more "licking and grooming" by dams results in "calmer" and "more confident" rats (Tough, 2012, p 53). To show this, one must account for, for instance, possible influence by the rats' genes. Tough writes (Tough, 2012, p 54):

> Meaney wondered if a dam's licking-and-grooming frequency was just a proxy for some genetic trait that was passed on from mother to child. Maybe nervous dams produced temperamentally nervous pups, and those dams also coincidentally happened to be less inclined to lick and groom. To test that hypothesis, Meaney and his researchers did a number of cross-fostering experiments, in which they removed pups at birth from a high-LG ["licking and grooming"] dam and put them in the litter of a low-LG dam, and vice versa, in all kinds of combinations. Whatever permutation they chose, though, however they performed the experiment, they found the same thing: what mattered was not the licking-and-grooming habits of the biological mother; it was the licking-and-grooming habits of the *rearing* mother.

A little earlier, when talking about the "Simon test" by Evans and Schamberg to test the working memory of kids, Tough also accounts for genes and states (Tough, 2012, p 43):

> We might be inclined to assume that the reason [the rich kid does better than the low-income kid] is genetic—maybe there's a Simon gene that rich kids are more likely to possess. Or maybe it has to do with material advantages in the

upper-middle-class kid's home—more books, more games, more electronic toys. Or maybe his school is a better place to learn short-term memory skills. Or perhaps it's some combination of the three. But what Evans and Schamberg found is that the more significant disadvantage the low-income boy faces is in fact his elevated allostatic load.

The above two studies do seem convincing, and support Tough's point that good parenting can counteract allostatic load. However, we must also note that after these two studies are mentioned, words like "gene", "genetic", and "DNA" never show up in the rest of the book. In other words, at least in Tough's reporting, none of the other studies or anecdotes in the book—on the "coding test", "learned optimism", the importance of "rigorous self-analysis", and so on—seem to account for the potential influence of genes. The biggest problem with Tough's book, then, is that the evidence, as reported, isn't convincing enough to prove his point that one should focus more on grit and character.

In addition, Tough also fails to distinguish between "shared environment" and "shared family environment", where for instance Judith Rich Harris argues that although the environment (in a general sense) does have an effect on children, the environment due to their parents (i.e. aside from genetics) has little influence over the personality of their children. (Caplan, 2009)[8] Indeed, Tough's book comes across as naïve and one-sided since he doesn't even discuss twin studies except in a passing remark about James Heckman. Tough's thesis has the potential to be correct, but the evidence he provides is insufficient.

Interestingly enough, compared to Freire, Tough is not ballistically moralistic, and in fact shies away from extensive discussions of ethics; quoting David Levin of KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program), Tough writes "The thing that I think is great about the character-strength approach is that it is fundamentally devoid of value [i.e. ethical] judgment". (Tough, 2012, p 93) By staying away from ethical judgments, Tough seems to avoid some of the pitfalls of Freire's work.

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[8]See also, for instance, Harris's *No Two Alike.*

So in fact, while Freire is swamped in his own vocabulary and Tough skillfully uses anecdotes, they both seem to argue a single, general point in an unconvincing manner. Whereas Freire seems almost completely unconvincing, Tough avoids some of the problems present in Freire by backing up claims with evidence, eschewing talk of ethics, and so on. However, even Tough relies too heavily on anecdotes, whose excessive use cannot be justified just to make a book engaging and seem "digested" for the masses; in order to prove a point, one must rely on more rigorous analyses. Anecdotes do have their place, and are useful as a test to see if one's data seems to be on track. Indeed, anecdotes can be a good perspective to have when making decisions.[9] Anecdotes can also be aggregated to prove more general claims ("aggregated anecdotes are data"). However, in general anecdotes can only prove isolated claims, not "big ideas". By looking at two isolated books, we have seen *some* of the errors in reasoning that are possible, and *potentially* common; only by extending this discussion to other works can we hope to claim answers to questions like "What are the *most common* pitfalls in discussing education?", "Do *all* discussions on education have problems?", and so on.

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[9]See for instance GiveWell (a charity evaluation organization), which uses multiple perspectives or "mental models", weighs each, and then comes up with a conclusion (Karnofsky, 2014).

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