

Paradox of education

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What is education? – Prescriptive definition

It must be recognized that what “cannot be changed” in education, besides the importance of computer and new media at school, is the paradox of education. It drew our attention thanks to the works of Minoru Murai. Before looking into his views, I would like to consider some common answers to the question “what is education?”

I am now teaching education at two universities. I make it a rule to ask this question to students at the beginning of the course. Their answers are about the same every year, both at Tamagawa University and Keio University, which can be classified into the following patterns:

- a) Education is character formation.
- b) Education is to make humans as humans should be.
- c) Education is to help students adapt to society.
- d) Education is to help enhance each student’s personality.
- e) Education is to develop and promote culture.

I then ask: to the answer of a) above, “What character should be formed? Is education designed to form characters which teachers think are appropriate as humans?” to b), “You mentioned humans twice. What is the difference between the former and the latter? Is the latter meant as humans that teachers think are appropriate?” to c), “Your answer means it would not be education if it is designed to reform society. Is that what you really mean?” to d), “Personality includes deceptive or deceitful characters. Do you mean those characters should also be enhanced?” to e), “Skills of theft or even killing machines can be regarded as a form of culture, but they are not a target of education to develop or inherit. So, some cultures are inherited but others are not. Who distinguishes the two and on what criteria?”

I know these questions are mean, but I dare bring up the questions and conclude by saying “So you think education is to make humans which teachers think are appropriate.” Students naturally argue back and sometimes elaborate on their definition of education. This practice prompts students to think more about “education,” but I do not go into further detail here. What is important is the fact that the students do not answer correctly to my first question.

“What is education?” was my question, but they misunderstood it as “how should education be?” or “what should education do?” All the answers mentioned above are based on the concept of “should.”

This kind of definition can be called prescriptive definition as it implies prescription of action. Philosopher Scheffler called it programmatic definition as it implies a program for action.”⁽¹⁾

As exemplified by the students’ answers above, education is often defined as prescriptive or programmatic, without recognition as such on the part of those who define it. People who think education is to “help enhance each student’s personality” tend to have an idea, maybe without knowing it, that rote learning or disregard of personality is “not an appropriate form of education.” Therefore, people who define education in a prescriptive manner, when they say “that’s not real education,” mean it is not education as defined by them or complying with their concept of education.

Like a human, like a woman

Education is not the only word susceptible to prescriptive definition. “Like a human,” “like a woman,” “like a student” etc. are other examples. Everybody knows the concept of normal and abnormal depends on whether it is judged on average or “value” standards. On average standards, people who live up to 100 years of age are abnormal, but they are not when judged on value standards.

The concept of “like a human” also depends on the standards. On average standards, “like a human” means that he or she has more human characteristics not shared with animals. Then, what are human characteristics? One of my students once answered that it is the propensity to gamble.

The student argued that, although tools and languages used to be mentioned as characteristics of the human being, it is now known that chimpanzees can use tools and have the capacity of language learning.⁽²⁾ In that sense, the difference between humans and chimpanzees is that of degree. Rational animal is a classical definition of man, but even dogs know how to circumvent an obstacle. Humans who rob a bank or disappear with debts to a moneylender cannot be considered rational as compared to animals. However, the student said, it has never been reported that a monkey gambled for an orange.

It may be the case. Certainly, I have never heard of a stray monkey offering nuts to the boss monkey to get his approval to go back to the troop. Bribing, on average standards, is clearly a “human characteristic.”

On average standards, it is not strange to tell a clumsy male Kabuki player of female roles to “act more like a woman.” But it is strange on the same average standard to tell a woman to “act more like a woman,” because most women already have average characteristics of a woman. Meanwhile, university students, when told to study more “like a student,” might reply that “studying is not a characteristic of a university student nowadays.”

In other words, when people say “like a human,” “like a woman” or “like a student,” they do not mean it on average standards, but on their own “value standards” on how a human, woman and student should be.

What makes it difficult, however, is that they do not specify their value standards. Their problem is that they believe their own values are self-evident, unquestioned universal values.

What is education? – descriptive definition

Then, how can education be defined not in a prescriptive manner but in a factual or descriptive manner? A descriptive definition of education must include all its usages and entail its general characteristics. It must encompass all implications of education, including rote learning, cramming or even teaching to steal or kill.

A typical example of a descriptive definition is found in a dictionary. The Iwanami Dictionary of Education by Akira Igarashi, et al., defines education, in its “intrinsic meaning,” as “conscious activity by individuals or specific organizations to guide immature children or youths toward common ideals and values with a view to maintaining and advancing society.”

This definition, though not free from problems as later discussed, can generally be called a descriptive definition of education. Education as defined above can include rote learning or cramming that disregards individual personality, because such teaching is presumably based on “common ideals and values,” however subjective they are, and is definitely “conscious activity” with a “view to maintaining and advancing the society.”

Teaching to steal or kill can also be called education as skills to steal or kill are “values” in some quarters of society, with the teaching of those skills apparently designed to attain the goal of “maintaining and advancing” those special societies.

When the question of “what is education” is answered in a descriptive manner, the statement that “it is not real education” would mean that it does not agree with the definition. For instance, as long as education is defined as in the Iwanami dictionary, education for the elderly or life-long education would not be “real education” as it is not given to “immature children” or “youths.” For such activity to be included in the concept of education, the above definition must be changed from “guide immature children or youths” to “guide persons” or something similar.

Education and advertising

A prescriptive or programmatic definition of education is the definer’s expression of their values or wishes of how education should be. As a result, unless such values or wishes are clarified and shared by others, it would be difficult to have broad discussions and exchange views on prescriptively defined education.

Descriptive definition, on the other hand, clarifies usual usages of the defined term, irrespective of the definer’s values or wishes. In other words, the defined term must be distinguished from related terms; otherwise the descriptive definition of education could not constitute a common basis for broad discussions on education.

In reality, however, a descriptive definition of education often leaves much to be desired, for instance in that it fails to distinguish education from advertising or breeding. How is education different from advertising? It has often been said that the two are different as follows:

- a) Advertising is designed to advance the advertiser’s interests, while education is for the interest of those who are taught. Improvement toward certain ideals or values is in the interest of those being taught.
- b) Advertising mainly appeals to the emotions or feelings of the target audience, but education is based on trust in their reason.
- c) Advertising targets an unspecified large number of people, while education is given to a specific, limited number of subjects.

Nowadays, however, it is difficult to distinguish between advertising and education based on the above criteria. For instance, advertisements for new medicines are not necessarily for the interest of their developers only; advertisements for a religion are not solely based on the interest of the advertiser either. It is true that advertising often appeals to emotions or feelings of the target audience, but we are seeing a growing tendency for advertising to focus on appealing to reason.

Conversely, education may sometimes be given for the interest of the educator. The interest in this case is not always economic interest, because it would serve the interest of the educator if their ideas or skills were widely spread and appreciated by others. Education could appeal to emotions rather than reason, and broadcast education is intended for an unspecified large number of people as well.

At present, therefore, education and advertising are closely related. However, it would not be appropriate to simply consider that advertising sometimes has characteristics of education and vice versa. We “think” by means of language. If the definition of education is left ambiguous, our thinking of education would inevitably be ambiguous.

Education and breeding

It is also the same as for the relationship between education and breeding. The aforementioned definition of education in the Iwanami dictionary fails to show the difference between education and breeding. Breeding is “raising or taming an animal” (Shogakukan Japanese Dictionary). How is it different from education as defined in the Iwanami dictionary? Education as defined in the dictionary would become breeding when “children or youths” are changed to “animals.”

Needless to say, breeding is done by “individuals or specific organizations” for such purposes as winning a horse race and training a guide dog, which could be regarded as “conscious activity toward common ideals and values with a view to maintaining and advancing society.”

The aforementioned definition of education is thus different from that of breeding only in that the former is for humans and the latter is for animals. Such an argument, however, would not be acceptable for anyone engaged in education, which brings us back to our first question of “what is education?”

What is education? – genetic definition

The question is clearly answered by Minoru Murai’s genetic definition. Murai, considering how the term “education” came to be used, advocates a definition that it is an “attempt to make children good.” “Children” in this definition do not have a substantial meaning, and should accurately be “humans expected to grow” irrespective of age. Murai argues as follows: All parents want to make their child good. All adults want youths to grow good. Humans, from the days of hunting for animals and gathering wild edible plants in mountains to the present, have kept this desire as parents and adults. All activities based on this desire are called “education,” which in that sense has always been and will continue to be cherished by people wanting to make youths good. ⁽³⁾

In other words, our compelling desire to make children and youths good implies that humans intrinsically seek “goodness.” “Goodness” is sought not only by adults but also children, who are also humans. Education, therefore, is based on the idea that both the educator and the educated seek “goodness.”

Some may oppose this argument, saying that “humans come to value goodness only because of education. They may argue that humans are not bad or good by nature, and if humans are good by nature, education would not be necessary.”

But the statement that “humans intrinsically seek goodness” is not the same as that “humans are good by nature,” nor that “humans are bad by nature.” As Murai points out, it is a historical fact that “humans seek goodness.” In that sense, it is appropriate to say that humans intrinsically seek goodness.

It can be said further that humans are not a blank piece of paper when it comes to whether they are good or bad. As they intrinsically seek “goodness,” they are not a blank piece of paper on which education can draw anything from scratch.

Humans seek goodness

Why can it be said that humans intrinsically seek goodness? Detailed arguments are found in the works of Murai, but the following two facts may be sufficient as explanations.

The first fact is that we often use “goodness” or “good” in our everyday life. In education, we always talk about “good education” or “good children.” We also value “good clothing,” “good food,” and “good housing.”

We seek “goodness” in our actions as well. “You should study,” “You should not engage in war,” “You should be kind to others,” etc., are all based on ideas that value goodness. However, “good” is not a synonym for “comfortable,” “favorite” or “useful.” It is nothing other than “good,” and we are aware of that.

Another fact is Xun Zi’s assertion that human dispositions are detestable. The ancient Chinese philosopher argued that “man is naturally inclined towards selfishness and evil, and that these inclinations should be rectified toward goodness.” But why did Xun Zi, as a human that he considered to be evil, argue the “need for rectification toward goodness?” His assertion itself is clear evidence that humans intrinsically “seek goodness.”

“Attempt to make children good” is not a prescriptive definition of education. It is not a reflection of Murai’s values or desires, but just a genetic fact of education. At the same time, it is not a descriptive definition of education either, in that it does not merely clarify conventional usages of the term education. He defined education as an attempt to make children (humans expected to grow) good, considering the fact that such attempts have constantly been made in human history.

I believe Murai’s definition is a perfect answer to the question “what is education?” because it focuses on the “attempt to make children good,” which is at the core of education and has constantly been made in human history. The definition distinguishes education from advertising, breeding, instruction, teaching and many other synonyms and overcomes the defects of conventional descriptive definitions of education.

Paradox of education

After education is defined as an “attempt to make children good,” the next question would be “what is goodness?” or “what does making children good mean?” As long as this point remains unclear, it would not be possible to decide “how to educate children.”

It would be difficult for anyone to give a definite answer to the question “what is goodness?” In fact, nobody in human history has come up with an answer that satisfies all. In this sense, education is a paradox. Let me refer to Murai’s remarks once again:

“Education, in its essence, is an attempt to make children ‘good,’ but nobody has a definite answer when they ask themselves ‘What is goodness?’ Still, we cannot help making constant efforts to make children ‘good.’ What does a ‘good’ human mean? What is ‘good’ knowledge? What is a ‘good’ society? We have no definite answers to those questions, but we still cannot help wishing for our children to be ‘good’ humans, have ‘good’ knowledge, live in a ‘good’ society and lead a ‘good’ life. (omission) This is the essence of education and this is a paradox of education.”⁽⁴⁾

Simply said, the paradox of education is that “nobody knows what is good while everybody tries to make children good through education.” The point is that “we cannot help making efforts to make our children good notwithstanding our ignorance of what is good.” “Cannot help making efforts” is definitely different from “should make efforts.” It means that humans intrinsically cannot help making such efforts.

This paradox would not be solved by the spread of computers and new media in education. If so, it would be better for us to accept the paradox as is and stay calm, acknowledging that both teachers and children seek goodness and that nobody can answer with firm conviction what goodness is, although education is defined as an attempt to make children good. Otherwise, education could lapse into compulsion to force teachers’ concept of what goodness is, even if their intention is to try to make children good. As long as this paradox is kept in mind, we would naturally consider seriously what “making children good” means and what and how we should teach children.

Translated from Numano, I. (1986). *Joho-ka Shakai to Kyoshi no Shigoto* [Informationalizing society and occupation of a teacher] , Kokudo-sha, pp. 35-50.