

Fusing Foundational and Transformative Approaches to History

Implications of Alfred North Whitehead's Philosophy of Education

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The purpose of this study is to examine how the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead informs us about how to reconcile foundational and transformative philosophies of history. Foundational and transformative perspectives differ about the nature of knowledge, how knowledge is constructed, and the purpose of knowledge. The study explores the strengths and weaknesses of each approach and how Whitehead's views on education and history can be used as a framework to link them together in a unified educational agenda. The purpose of this inquiry is not to engage in an examination of the overall limitations or deficits of foundational and transformative approaches or issues surrounding pedagogy. Existing scholarship is abundant with attacks and counterattacks. Scholarship on foundational and transformative perspectives is often framed in terms of one side amassing evidence to support its case while ignoring benefits other perspectives bring to the discussion. The debate has often consisted of each side building a case supporting its position or attacking the other, then presenting the findings in a sympathetic forum where the information will not be seriously scrutinized and in many cases little good has emerged from it (Banks 4). The discord between foundational and trans-

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formative knowledge has produced limitations of thought on both sides. Rather, this study explores some of Whitehead's theoretical literature as a

means of provoking scholars to think about ways in which foundational and transformative perspectives on history can be incorporated into the same curriculum. In order to move the discussion toward a synthesis between foundational and transformative perspectives this study examines the appropriateness and implications of foundational and transformative approaches through the lens of Whitehead's educational philosophy.

"Transformative" is a term better suited to this study than "multicultural." There is less agreement to the aims, boundaries and specifics of multicultural education. There is a looseness in the core concept of "culture" which can refer to anything concerning a group (Zorn). Multiculturalism tends to understate the degree to which values, knowledge and lifestyles are shared among cultures who live in the same geographic area (Zorn). Furthermore, it does not take into account differences within a group, and is open to the criticism that it overgeneralizes group characteristics (Zorn). Some scholars interpret it as a means to understand non-white groups, while others focus on issues of class or gender. An even broader interpretation refers to any group that has been historically under-represented or unacknowledged (Banks). For purposes of clarity foundational and transformative epistemologies are used as the focus of this study.

There exists a wide body of interpretation over what constitutes foundational knowledge for any discipline or profession (Alexander, Murphy & Woods). The foundational knowledge approach is designed to develop an understanding in students of the essential knowledge of history. The goal of this approach is to provide students with a core body of essential knowledge, and the thinking skills to apply that knowledge to investigate areas of interest on their own. One of the criticisms of contemporary higher education is that it fails to provide students with a body of foundational knowledge that prepares them to be lifelong learners or to communicate within a profession or field of study (Bennett; Bloom). Advocates of foundational knowledge support a curriculum that emphasizes a common culture and history through the study of seminal literature (Rorty). Advocates of foundational knowledge are often defenders of the Western canon who advocate a curriculum based on the continued dominance and cultural superiority of Western civilization (Banks; Henry). The foundational knowledge perspective addresses the issue of cultural relevance by relying on the cultural superiority of Western civilization. Because the contributions of Western civilization in areas of art, literature, science, government, etc., transcend cultural boundaries, there is no need for historical perspectives which emphasize or isolate particular groups. Western

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traditionalists claim that the Western canon is indispensable and must be preserved because it represents the most advanced state of human development and is essential to maintaining our cultural, historical and national identity. The goals of scholarship in traditional knowledge are accuracy, analysis and objectivity in reconstruction of the past; however, even supporters of the traditional knowledge approach acknowledge how historical interpretations are misshaped by individual prejudices or preconceptions (Schlesinger 45-46).

A different perspective supports the idea that education has historically marginalized the intellectual, social and cultural history of women and non-white racial groups (Alexander, Murphy & Woods). Transformative knowledge is defined as "concepts, paradigms, themes, and explanations that challenge mainstream academic knowledge and that expand the historical and literary canon" (Banks). The transformative agenda understands knowledge in terms of how it is constructed and how it reflects the social context in which it was created. For transformative knowledge to be effective at its mission to include representation of excluded groups, it must be framed in a manner that identifies the weaknesses of the traditional curriculum (Minnich 12). The purpose of transformative knowledge is to add to the body of knowledge that composes the curricular cannon. Transformative scholars take the position that no knowledge is objective and value free, but is subject to the power of human interests and changing values.

The foundational perspective toward history focuses on developing and transmitting a set of objective truths that cannot be mutated by human biases (Kaplan). The historical knowledge that composes a foundational knowledge base is intended to be part of a curriculum to which all students should be exposed.

The foundational knowledge emphasis has been found to increase understanding of the underpinnings of historical change. However, it has not adequately represented the experiences of diverse groups and has been criticized by transformative scholars for representing a historical perspective divorced from human experience. When the histories of diverse groups are included it seems to do so in a manner that can be compared to "social lag" in terms of curricular change. Flexner addresses the issue of social influence using the term "social lag" to describe how institutions or curricula change in such a way that they lag behind society. He felt that curriculum should reflect social need; however, he and Kliebard (1986) cautioned that curriculum should not be a weather vane, responsive to every

variation of the public whim, and must at times give society not what society wants but what it needs.

Whitehead was critical of an emphasis on the "matter-of-fact" in history teaching (FR 24). The narration of sequences emphasizing dates and key figures divorces historical study from an understanding of the interwoven relationship between large social, political, and economic events. A historical perspective based on a chronological chain of names, dates and leading figures emphasizes mechanics and discourages creative or innovative thinking by students (AE 29). Narrative history additionally does not account for the influence of personal and ideological motives (MT 25). In order to write an adequate history of Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima one would have to detail Einstein's resistance to using the device; opposition by many of the scientists who developed it; conflicting views presented to the President by military, foreign policy and political leaders; and contemporaneous American views of the Japanese willingness to continue fighting. Such a complex perspective reflects competing historical explanations and encourages the student to arrive at his or her own decision using much of the same information Truman had in 1945. Historical perspectives like the previous example reflect Whitehead's philosophy that causation is derived from human thought and human interactions (MT 24).

To make history alive with meaning historians must be able to present detail within the context of generalities. Whitehead frames a fusion of foundational and transformative perspectives in the following passage from *Essays in Science and Philosophy*:

Any account of a phase of national life must throw light on two things: (a) why the nation is as good as it is, and (b) why the nation is as bad as it is. If it be our own country which is in the question, the combined complex fact is the country which we love, with its virtues and its defects. [26]

Much of the rhetoric generated by the recent "culture wars" has distorted both foundational and transformative perspectives. Foundational knowledge, like transformative knowledge, is fluid and in a state of continual change. The criticism that traditional knowledge represents a static body impervious and resistant to change or inclusion is to misrepresent the nature of curricula. The canon and paradigms that constitute traditional knowledge are in a continual state of challenge and revision from internal and external scholarship. Challenges to old knowledge and the inclusion of new knowledge result in new paradigms and interpretations (Kuhn).

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Knowledge is best understood as part of a changing universe where it changes as we move into the future. Even in scientific thought no conclusion remains unchanged through the increase in related knowledge (MT 123). Rather than being static, curriculum is not fixed in an unchangeable form, but is a dynamic form of knowledge that is always under change and construction (Gumpert; Short). Legitimacy is relative and contingent on the historical context because knowledge is continually evolving (Gumpert). Curricula, therefore, are in a constant state of fluctuation in response to social demands. It is one of the strengths of curriculum that it has the ability to reflect the interest of groups in society (Kliebard 1992).

The study of curriculum history reveals that the body of core knowledge has indeed changed remarkably as its history is traced from ancient Greece, through Rome, Europe, and America. A perspective that regards the Western canon as continually evolving to meet the needs of a changing civilization is consistent with Whitehead's "First Principle of Epistemology" (ESP 41). Whitehead's epistemological theory was based on the notion that our continually changing relations to our world should be the primary topics of investigation. Allowing for a totality of perspectives facilitates imagination in thought and helps further progress. It avoids a stagnancy of the curriculum or the attitude that knowledge that originated from a single culture, civilization or epistemology is real knowledge. Whitehead was fond of an old English rhyme that described the attitude of a former Master of Trinity College and summarized his dislike of exclusionary curricular perspectives (MT 59):

I am Master of this College;
And what I know not,
Is not knowledge.

Transformative knowledge plays an important role in fostering critical thinking and knowledge development skills of students. While the goal of foundational knowledge is that everybody is exposed to the same knowledge base, the goal of transformative knowledge is to question how that knowledge based was developed. In specialized history courses, students are often required to examine conflicting explanations for historical trends. Academic exercises that encourage students to question how knowledge was created lay the foundation for knowledge development skills.

Foundational and transformation perspectives embody different modes of thought represented in different periods of history. Whitehead pointed out that every age contains a variety of modes of thought, some dominant

and others more obscured in the background (MT 26). Because of the long lag time it takes for new knowledge to be included in the foundational perspective on history, the transformative route for the inclusion of knowledge is most appealing for many scholars. This is particularly important for historical perspectives based on gender or ethnicity. The transformative perspective of educational history is essential to the inclusion of issues of diversity and representation in history.

An understanding of Whitehead's stages of mental growth helps us apply foundational and transformative knowledge through the curriculum. Whitehead objected to the idea of education as a steady and uniform advancement without differentiation (AE 17). He based his educational philosophy on the idea that life is periodic and consists of several distinct periods. His view of human learning as a growth process characterized by stages is consistent with recent developmental perspectives on learning. Whitehead developed three stages of education that are cyclically repeated throughout the learning process as the student is exposed to new subject material. The first stage, romance, represents first exposure to a field of study. In the first stage, the student is primarily interested in the basic factual knowledge comprising the body of the subject and how connections are made within it. The second stage is precision and involves mastering the subject matter and learning to communicate effectively in order to understand relations. The third stage, generalization, takes place largely in the sphere of higher education where the student studies how ideas and theories apply to concrete cases (AE 19-25).

Whitehead's philosophies of education and history provide us with a framework to fuse foundational and transformative perspectives of history. The understanding of cultural or ethnic history is invaluable for minority and majority groups if they are to understand themselves and each other in the larger world history (Schlesinger 48). Spring finds that for many generations minority groups looked toward education for hope to improve their condition (x). To understand how educational history has meant different things to different people at the same point in history, we must examine it from the standpoint of multiple constituencies (Fass 4). Whitehead's educational philosophy is consistent with such perspectives. Education must avoid an emphasis on curricula which have no bearing on individual personal experiences during the transition from the particular to the general over the course of human development (Whitehead, AE 64).

It is human nature to resist rapid, revolutionary change. We tend to be more comfortable with evolutionary change which affords us more time

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to adapt to circumstances. Revolutions in social perspectives or radical new ways of interpreting events that define a group, nation or civilization result in emotional responses (Whitehead, MT 130). The collapse of many of the nineteenth century's dogmas illustrates that we must prepare ourselves for possibilities and interpretations that could challenge our own comfortably held ideas (AI 186).

When we engage in a debate over the implications of foundational and transformative approaches to history we are really discussing the meaning of knowledge. Much about what historians of the foundational and transformative approaches disagree about focuses directly on meaning. Historians may be in agreement over dates and events, such as when Harvard College was founded. However, they may forcefully disagree over the meaning of its founding. Was it to educate clergy for the Puritan society that was essentially theocratic? Or, was it to perpetuate economically based social stratification and gender supremacy by ensuring that the sons of wealthy families could benefit from higher education that would lead them into positions of social control and influence? The answer depends on who you ask and the epistemological framework they apply to answer the question.

One of the findings of this study is that both the foundational and transformative perspectives have something of value to offer the way in which we teach history. If we frame foundational and transformative perspectives in terms of "generalized" and "specialized" knowledge, each can be fixed in a specific role in teaching history. A foundational approach is best suited to convey important subject matter that all students should apprehend (Hirsch). Such generalized knowledge serves as the fundament for later challenges to or interpellation of foundational knowledge. Students can hardly be expected to question the legitimacy or relevance of the foundational knowledge base if they have not first been exposed to it. The contrast between generalized and specialized knowledge is based on the understanding that in order to learn critical thinking skills central to transformative scholarship, students must principally learn subject area content. Such a perspective is entirely consistent with Whitehead's views on how different types of content should be stressed at different points in a student's education. Whitehead concludes that specialized education should take place at a later point in a student's education. Specialized knowledge is easier for the student to absorb because it is of particular interest to the student. Broad based generalized study is designed to stimulate activity in the student's mind, and direct energy toward specialized areas of particular interest (AE 11).

The division between foundational and transformative knowledge parallels the division between the natural sciences and moral sciences which Whitehead often criticized. To bridge the gap between foundational and transformative epistemologies scholars must conceive the two in relative terms. Assertions that a crystallized Western canon exists are inaccurate and misleading. The foundational knowledge base indeed changes with the inclusion of new knowledge, though admittedly too slowly for the satisfaction of many transformative scholars. Furthermore, the foundational perspective advocates the learning of a common body of knowledge, though few foundationalists would suggest reliance on rote memorization and verbatim regurgitation, or claim that an understanding of core knowledge is alone sufficient to develop higher level thinking skills (Hirsch).

Further inquiries into the implications of foundational and transformative epistemologies will be necessary to better gauge their application in providing students with an understanding of history. Alexander and Knight remind us that education has been handicapped in its ability to influence meaningful change because of the profession's lack of understanding about its own history (Alexander & Knight). The detailed study of our past and our representative constituencies is vital if we expect to be productive in the future (Cuban).

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