How Does Education Benefit Incarcerated People?

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What is the value of education for incarcerated people? Dale Brown tells us with one gut-wrenching example in his paper's opening lines that incarcerated students are—often or typically—grateful for the opportunities to use their minds that courses in philosophy, or the humanities in general, provide.[1] I expect that very few of us who have not been incarcerated can fully grasp the awfulness of spending even a month of our lives incarcerated, unable to use our minds and all that entails, let alone the horror of spending years or decades in this state. I will not attempt to elaborate all that this entails, but it would presumably include a massive thwarting of one's human potential, the forms of satisfaction inherent in fulfillments of that potential, and opportunities to experience progress in one's life. One would be alive but systematically denied the kinds of opportunities to exert oneself that are essential to living well. I view education as properly formative in ways that inherently involve ongoing opportunities to engage in the activities of a good life—activities in which students experience rewarding progress in fulfilling their potential.[2] Thinking of education as enabling people to live well—not just in some distant future, but incrementally along the way—demystifies the idea that education is transformative, both in general and in ways that could make a hugely beneficial difference in the lives of incarcerated people.

Shortly into his discussion of some passages from Ralph Waldo Emerson, Brown writes that, "We know that the experience of higher education changes students apart from the acquisition of facts and skills . . . yet quite often we fail to acknowledge the difficulty in articulating just what this is." I quite agree that equating education with acquisition of skills and facts—more plausibly, knowledge—is terribly misguided, but I would not restrict this to higher education or see Emerson's remarks as limited to higher education as we now conceive it. Not only when Emerson wrote, but until about 1920, colleges in the U.S. did not provide a further stage of education beyond high school or what academies provided. These were parallel, not sequential, institutions, and the terminal

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degree-granting public high schools created in the late nineteenth century competed directly with colleges and were often referred to as "people's colleges."[3] I will not hazard a guess as to how many high schools actually provided "higher education" in the liberal arts, but—writing in 1916—a paramount concern of John Dewey's was to defend this ideal in a way that rejected the distinction between liberal education for elites and vocational education for the masses.[4]

In making this point, I am not casting doubt on the value of collegiate-quality liberal education for incarcerated people. An argument that such education should be publicly provided might indeed be framed as an extension of other arguments I have made, including my longstanding argument that societies cannot justly punish anyone they have not made adequate efforts to educate.[5] What I do want to argue in drawing attention to K-12 education is that the kind of transformative education Brown has in mind is both feasible and important in schools. The idea that a society could justly delay transformative liberal education until after high school is unconscionably inhumane—not that I think Brown's focus on higher education implies any such delay.

Brown describes the aspect of education he finds elusive as a "quasi-religious, intangible, perhaps even ineffable quality" of education, and he identifies it with humanizing education in the humanities or what Emerson describes as works of genius setting students' hearts on fire. The ideas he draws from a variety of sources fit together like a kaleidoscopic montage of overlapping images of the content and purpose of this humanistic education. What is "ignited" is variously described as a desire to create, thinking, lifelong learning, coming to terms with or navigating the human condition, overcoming limits, transforming oneself and one's situation, expanding one's horizons or grasping diverse viewpoints, overcoming suffering and hardship, and perpetual self-improvement defined as "understanding, expanding, and transforming one's reality." I think I understand what Emerson had in mind in referring to "gathering from far every ray of various genius" and animating scholars with a desire to create.[6] He was calling on Americans to move beyond fetishizing European cultural objects and create a culture of their own. With this I have no quarrel, but the connections to other items on Brown's list are rather loose.

My own most relevant transformative experience may provide a helpful

illustration. In the summer of 1970, before I began high school, I encountered in a book from my neighborhood library the invention of proofs by mathematical induction as a way to establish theorems about infinite series. I can still feel myself perched on a courtyard bench in the oppressive heat of a New Orleans summer day and being blown away—on fire with ideas, as they say. I was sold on philosophy in an instant, before I knew it was philosophy, and it set me on a path of progress in my life.[7] The heart of that encounter with genius was an experience of electrifying intellectual empowerment, awe, and valuing something I had not known existed. New-found valuing can be transformative, and it is conspicuously absent from the equation of education with acquiring knowledge and skills. I will say more about this in a moment. The immediate point I want to make is that an enchantment with mathematical induction that inspires creative efforts is embraced by Emerson's formulation, but it is a way of being on fire that might or might not lead to other things on Brown's list, such as navigating the human condition. If the point of the trail he blazes is to get us from "ignition" to his final formulation of a humanizing education in the humanities—perpetual self-improvement in the sense of "understanding, expanding, and transforming one's reality"—we need a better explanation of how the pieces fit together.[8]

Returning to the theme of new-found valuing, I will conclude with a brief explanation of my opening suggestion that seeing education as enabling people to live well demystifies the idea that education can be transformative, both in general and for incarcerated people.[9] I alluded to thwarting and fulfillment of human potential, forms of satisfaction inherent in fulfillments of that potential, and opportunities to exert oneself in ways that fulfill one's potential in the kinds of activities that constitute living well. The relevant activities are eudaimonic, in the sense that they fulfill potential in ways that rely on and exhibit admirable human attributes and are personally meaningful and satisfying. If we think of the broad categories of human potential as intellectual or agentive (the potential for rational self-determination), social, and productive (the potential to create and do things), there are basic psychological needs (for self-determination, positive relatedness, and competence) that are linked to fulfillment of these forms of potential and are foundational to personal well-being, and there

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are three forms of acquired human excellence (understanding; intellectual and moral virtues; and capabilities) essential to eudaimonic activity.[10] From the perspective of this framework, what is transformative for a given person in the circumstances of their life could be formative—the acquisition of some form or forms of understanding, virtue or valuing, or capability—but it might also be circumstantial: a needs-supportive opportunity to engage in eudaimonic activity. It is opportunities for intrinsically motivated engagement in such activity that most powerfully propel learning and personal growth. Even if they were not, I expect the case for providing them to incarcerated people would be compelling.

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1 Dale Brown, "Setting Students' Hearts on Flame: How a Humanizing Higher Education Rooted in the Humanities Can Be Beneficial for Justice-Involved People," Philosophy of Education 78, no. 2 (same issue).

2 See Randall Curren, "Transformative Valuing," Educational Theory 70, no. 5 (2020): 581-601; "Punishment and Motivation in a Just School Community," Theory and Research in Education 18, no. 1 (2020): 17-33; "Enabling Everyone to Live Well," in Handbook of Philosophy of Education, ed. Randall Curren (New York: Routledge, in press).

3 See Calvin O. Davis, A History of the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, 1895-1945 (Ann Arbor, MI: The NCACSS, 1945); Hugh Hawkins, Banding Together: The Rise of National Associations in American Higher Education, 1887-1950 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

4 John Dewey, Democracy and Education (New York: Free Press, 1966), 250-260.

5 Randall Curren, Aristotle on the Necessity of Public Education (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000); "Punishment and Motivation in a Just School Community."

6 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 1940), 51-52.

7 For details, see Randall Curren, "My Life in Philosophy," in Leaders in Philosophy of Education: Intellectual Self-Portraits, ed. Leonard J. Waks (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2014), 41-56.

8 Curren, "My Life in Philosophy."

9 See Curren, "Transformative Valuing," for details.

10 Ibid. See also, Curren, "Enabling Everyone to Live Well."

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