

THE ROOTS OF CONNOISSEURSHIP AND CRITICISM

A Personal Journey

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The invitation extended to me by the editors to reflect upon the roots of my thinking regarding educational evaluation is both flattering and daunting. It is flattering because few academics do not relish the opportunity to tell their life stories, even if they are not anthropologists! It is daunting because I believe we really don't always know where our ideas come from. Certainly, we have some notions, we can identify some sources of influence, but many of the important details are beyond the realm of our consciousness. Yet I embark upon this journey, in a sense, as a source of discovery as well as a source of narrative.

To understand where my ideas come from about evaluation in education and, more specifically, with respect to educational connoisseurship and criticism, one must understand my relationship to the arts. The arts have always been my passion. At one time I wanted to become a painter. But the course of that journey, like so many when it comes to that oxymoronic notion called "career planning," did not lead me to become the painter I initially hoped I would become. I never had any regrets. My artistic needs are satisfied by being a collector, indeed, I should say, a lover of the arts. Clearly, the terms

connoisseurship and *criticism* are rooted in the arts, and are found there with much greater frequency than they are in any of the social sciences. For many academics, the term *connoisseurship* is strange; it is not a term with which they are familiar and for which they often have difficulty spelling! *Connoisseurship*, when it is encountered, has a particular tone. It has little to do with measured variables, with factor analysis, with multivariate analysis, or the array of statistical procedures used to do “real” educational research. Things, however, have changed.

I must not stray from my story. Growing up in the city of Chicago on weekends, I would go with my father to a place called Maxwell Street. Maxwell Street was a street of about a quarter of a mile in length, on which old and new goods of all kinds were being sold. It was, in a way, a kind of glorified bazaar or street market, one that accommodated thousands of people on any good Sunday, the day on which it was most densely populated by visitors. I would go with my father to Maxwell Street and accompany him as he searched for tools that he could use in his work. My trips there began when I was about 8, and by the time I was 11, I was offered a job in the shoe store in which I had been purchasing shoes for the prior 4- or 5-year period. I was to work on Saturday or on Sunday for a few hours each day. For me, it was a golden opportunity.

The importance of this opportunity will become clear as I proceed. The name of the shoe store in which I worked was “The Sample Shoe Store.” One accessed The Sample Shoe Store by walking down 13 steps on a stairway connecting it to the street. The Sample Shoe Store was exactly that. The owner purchased sample or end-of-the-run shoes from other shoe stores and sold them at bargain prices. Some of these shoes came from high-end shoe stores on Michigan Avenue in Chicago and others from low-priced, ordinary shoe outlets throughout the city. The opportunity to compare shoes with respect to the qualities they displayed—the kind of leather that was used on the uppers, the kind of leather that was used, if at all, on the soles, the type of stitching that was used, the quality of the shoestrings employed, and, of course, the way in which the heels were stacked on ladies’ shoes—these and other features became important considerations for me in assessing the quality of a shoe. In a period of a year or so, I became, one might say, a connoisseur of shoes. I learned what to look for, and I could recognize quality when I saw it. In addition, I could give you reasons for my judgment. I became someone who, in this domain at least, could notice.

This noticing ability, this ability to recognize differences that are subtle but significant in a particular qualitative display, is a pervasive feature of those who exercise connoisseurship in a particular domain. A literary connoisseur is able to discern the quality of writing and give reasons for his or her judgment. A music connoisseur can recognize the qualities of a symphonic performance and can make judgments about its virtues. A social critic whose connoisseurship extends to the qualities of life in a neighborhood, a town, a nation, is able to provide insights that eventually become illuminating. Connoisseurs are people who come to know, and critics are people who can render what they come to know in a language that is accessible to others and that enables others to “re-see” the work, the performance, or the object at hand.

Connoisseurship and criticism are, of course, not limited to the fine arts. We see it displayed in blazing glory in watching a first-rate basketball coach analyze the strengths of the opponents, their weaknesses, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the team that he or she is coaching. In addition, the critic as coach needs to make information available to his or her team to enable them to prevail in the game. Good coaches know what they are looking at and are able to provide assistance to improve the performance of their players. This by no means is a trivial accomplishment, as evidenced by the magnitude of the salaries that coaches receive. Thus, what we have here is a human ability that is widespread. People purchasing vegetables in a market learn to pay attention to the quality of the fruit that they consider selecting. Mechanics listen to motors and are often able to do a quick read on the problem that needs to be addressed. Lovers of wine gear up to experiencing the subtleties, the nose, the finish of the wine that they are tasting. Indeed, their perception of wine is often so complex that a new terminology is created to enable wine critics to talk about what is very difficult to describe in ordinary language.

In dealing with works of art, connoisseurs often look at relationships. The reason is clear. In dealing with paintings, for example, the character of any particular spot on a canvas from a visual perspective is significantly influenced by the context in which it resides. A spot that looks yellow in one context can look green in another. Thus, the perception of qualitative relationships and the kind of experience that those relationships evoke become extraordinarily important resources in doing good art criticism. Meaning is expressed in relationships.

The perceptive reader will recognize that attention to relationships is no less important in observing classrooms and schools than it is in looking at a

sculpture by Michelangelo or listening to a trumpet solo by Wynton Marsalis. In all cases, relationships matter, for what something is, is influenced dramatically by how the qualities that it possesses relate to one another.

Although my “training” to achieve a high level of connoisseurship with respect to shoes—and I might add, to clothing as well—was not formalized, it was nevertheless exemplified; there was a kind of apprenticeship model at work when I was learning the shoe trade. If one could create a formula or algorithm or recipe or a system of rules with which to become a connoisseur, the task of connoisseurship would be far easier than it is at the moment. There are no algorithms, rules, recipes, or the like to use. One must look hard to see what is subtle but significant. One must yield or surrender to the work to allow its work to work on you. And, of course, one must be able to employ a language, which often means creating a language through which what you as critic have experienced can be shared with others. This is done not essentially to convert the task from one of revealing the qualities of an object to describing the emotions of a critic. The trick is for the critic to do what John Dewey says good critics should do, namely, to reeducate perception. The aim of criticism, he said, is “the reeducation of the perception of the work of art” (Dewey, 1934). Applied to education, educational criticism is an effort to reveal what is important in a practice, a textbook, a teaching performance so that others less perceptive in that domain or perceptive in different ways can participate in what the critic claims is there.

There is no inclination on my part to suggest that there is only one way to see something. One of the great virtues of criticism is that it affords multiple perspectives, which can, of course, be deliberated with those holding other views. In the process, it is very likely that one’s awareness of the content and form of a text, for example, will be deepened or made more expansive.

Promoting the ability to see a process or a work from multiple perspectives is utterly consistent with connoisseurship. It is also *inconsistent* with the idea that by using highly reductionistic techniques, someone will be able to catch the tiger by the tail. Standard forms of evaluation typically place a premium on behavioral specificity and on procedures that will quantify an individual’s attainment. This often leads to methods that can handle such aspirations. Those methods very often leave out more than they include. It is certainly possible to describe some aspects of an individual in number, but number simply will not exhaust the features, very often the most important features, that an individual possesses. Numbers are very good for hat and shoe

size, for buying a belt or a shirt, for determining how much somebody weighs, but the characterization of the way in which individuals inquire or how they handle ideas can only be dimly revealed through the quantification of information. Number needs a referent. Those referents are often qualities, and those qualities are often extremely difficult to quantify.

To mention some of the limitations of quantitative material is not to say that quantification has no place or even a little place in educational evaluation methodology. Obviously, that is not the case. What is the case is that we should be recognizing the constraints and affordances of any form of representation we elect to use. Just as a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing, a way of describing is also a way of not describing. The tools we employ for noticing have an enormous impact on what it is that we become aware of. If we want a replete, fulsome, generous, complex picture of a classroom, a teacher, or a student, we need approaches to the perception of such phenomena and, in addition, a form of representation that will make those features vivid. Educational criticism has much to offer with respect to such matters.

To talk about the impact of forms of representation is to recognize that symbol systems are not neutral. The way in which language is used matters. Language can be treated in a literal manner, in a literary manner, and in a poetic form. Criticism in general and educational criticism in particular often rely upon artistically constructed linguistic forms that evoke in the reader a certain quality of experience that is informative about the situation being described. Consider what good writers do. There are many writers who address the holocaust in their novels, but the work of Elie Wiesel (1960) stands out—not only because his insights are deep into the situations he describes but also because the language he employs makes empathic participation possible. We come to identify with the victims of the holocaust. We come to undergo a small part of what they might have experienced. In this sense, the treatment of language in its literary and often poetic form promotes a certain form of understanding, a kind of knowing that is somatic and not only cognitive in a very narrow sense.

Educational criticism acknowledges this impact and indeed attempts to exploit the literary treatment of language to reveal what other forms of representation cannot disclose.

Ultimately, I envision evaluation practices in which film and video and other forms of representation that are not primarily linguistic will be used to make vivid the quality of life that goes on in schools and in classrooms.

Parents, for example, ought to know what the character of the environment is in the classrooms their children populate. Many of the most important lessons that are taught in school are implicit rather than explicit, covert rather than overt, hidden rather than revealed. An educational connoisseur would, in principal, notice such qualities, and if he or she had good critical abilities, the writing or imagery that was produced would make the characteristics of that environment plain for parents and for others interested in the lessons schools teach.

The importance of this point, I think, cannot be underestimated. John Dewey once said that it was one of education's great fallacies to assume that the student learns only what he is being taught at the time. Students learn many things at the same time, and the question that should concern educators is whether the array of consequences students experience are, on the whole, positive or whether they are problematic. There is much, I think, to give us concern about the technically rationalized school culture in which many students live in the context of their classrooms.

Another important aspect of educational criticism deals with the relationship of attention to the particular and the need for something general. Readers familiar with educational criticism will know that it has four dimensions. It is focused on description, it provides interpretation, it is evaluative, and it yields themes that are developed from the particular case address. These four dimensions are typically integrative, but for analytic purposes, I separate them here.

Where does generalization, if at all, operate in educational criticism? How can the study of a particular yield ideas that transcend the particular that was studied? It does so by recognizing that the features revealed in any particular case can be used as cues for seeking similar qualities in other situations. Life itself is not a randomly selected event representing a population. It is a collection of unique events, which are employed by individuals to anticipate the future or to increase the efficiency through which other situations are investigated. Particulars do in fact generalize. The type of generalization that is derived from the study of particulars is not one that makes a specific prediction about other states of affairs; what it does is to provide ideas or images through which other situations can be more effectively investigated. For example, in *The Shopping Mall High School* by Powell, Farrar, & Cohen (1985), the authors point out that high school students often establish treaties with their teachers so that there is a mutual understanding about the conditions of shared life in that classroom. Such treaties enable the various parties to reduce the

potential of conflict. That observation was derived from a limited number of schools, yet once coming across it, one can use that generalization as a way of looking for treaties in high schools other than the ones that Powell, Farrar, and Cohen investigated. Such ideas or images become anticipatory schemata that make more efficient our search-and-rescue efforts in the context of qualitative research.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of educational connoisseurship and educational criticism in the context of educational evaluation is the importance it assigns to both perception and representation. If connoisseurship is the art of appreciation, criticism is the art of disclosure. Educational connoisseurship and educational criticism make plain the importance of forms of representation other than those used in traditional social science. It acknowledges what I believe to be a fact, namely, that knowledge of the world is mediated by structures that humans invent, and the characters of these structures are not passive, they operate in shaping what we think about and how we think about it. By expanding the array of tools, we implicitly expand also our assumptions about how we come to know and how the world can be studied and described. We appeal not only to the social sciences to find and use methods for the enlargement of human understanding, we can also appeal to the arts and the humanities. Educational connoisseurship and educational criticism represent an effort to employ what the arts and humanities as partners with the social sciences have to offer in advancing our understanding of the process and effects of education. In an age of high-stakes testing, it is a perspective we badly need.

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