



A Pedagogy of Consilience and Renewal

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Abstract: This essay calls for a pedagogy of consilience and renewal as a dynamic fusion of research and practices in order to provide a more coherent way of examining some of the keen, interlaced variables that trouble the academy and society. The project challenges scholars to study five key scholarship of learning variables that should help transform the way we look at pedagogy for the betterment of North American society and beyond. The variables—a quintile—are knowledge, geography, critical thinking, civic engagement, and empathy.

Introduction

“I can’t breathe,” said George Floyd repeatedly 20 times, as he begged for his life in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on May 25, 2020, while police officer Derek Chauvin knelt for 9 minutes on his neck. Despite Floyd’s moving, haunting pleas for his life, Chauvin remained tone-deaf and just kept kneeling, creating awful physical indentations in Mr. Floyd’s neck, which are too graphic for many to view on television. All who witnessed the event, saw the tape, or heard about Chauvin’s cruel actions were outraged, and many began sustained protests against police brutality and for racial justice. The killing of Mr. Floyd not only highlighted the gross injustices and cruelties that characterized Black lives during slavery, but it also called special attention to systemic and legally sanctioned discrimination.

Moreover, the killing reminded citizens of Jim Crow laws that thwarted Black progress such that today, according to Egginton (2018), “The average wealth of black families is less than a tenth of that of white families” (p. 106). The civil rights movement and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “March on Washington” speech on August 28, 1963, also dramatized the cruel effects of racial segregation and inequality on Black lives, which matter!

But denials of full justice for African Americans and others also have had deleterious effects overall because such denials undermined America's social contract and diminished fellow feeling among citizens (Egginton, 2018; Reeves, 2017). The recent lawful protests, rioting, looting, and vandalism in major cities further reveal the fragility of America's social fabric. Crucially, such acts exposed the staggering harm that arises because of an inequitable and unjust society. Therefore, we must end racial discrimination not only because it is the morally right thing to do, but also because change is necessary if we are to become a more cohesive and thriving place, with equal justice for all. Moreover, in the United States, where there is so much misery, divisiveness, discord, and inequality, there is an important role for a consilience of pedagogy and renewal to play in creating social change.¹

A consilience of pedagogy and renewal should provide teachers, scholars, and students an opportunity to move "beyond business as usual" in the academy into a world of rich research and possibilities for change. A pedagogy of consilience and renewal is defined as a dynamic fusion of research projects and practices that should provide a coherent way of examining some of the keen variables that trouble the academy and society. The project centers on a robust attention to key aspects of American life and learning that should also help to transform the way we look at pedagogy for the betterment of North American society and beyond.

This imperative "call" challenges us to study five key scholarship of learning elements—a quintile—that are interlaced together like an exquisite coral. They include knowledge, geography, critical thinking, civic engagement, and empathy. Each one of the factors is deeply layered with social and cultural meaning, with an explicit and implicit condensation of values, beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. Deliberate attention to the quintile may also be viewed as a crucial way of understanding the immeasurable compatibility of pedagogical ideas and practices, with knowledge occupying the hub and other points radiating outward like spokes in a wheel. Each spoke relies on the other for sturdiness and usefulness to civil society. Another virtue of using the consilience of pedagogy and renewal model is that scholars may bunch together other key, compatible, and useful values that organize human thought and behavior into understandable patterns in exciting ways.

Thus, inherent within the project is the idea that we recognize more fully the central importance of the quintile in the renewal of American pedagogy and civic culture. Of course, the list is not an exhaustive taxonomy. Rather, there are also other compelling elements that might be conjoined in the future, including technology, for example. However, at this stage of our intellectual inquiry, it behooves us to study the present quintile as we rethink our underlying assumptions about the impact of the scholarship of teaching and learning on student engagement, attitudes, and behavior. Furthermore, this approach allows us to test our students' understanding of how the human mind is shaped by a fusion of knowledge and practice.

In the following sections, I outline why studying each factor should help facilitate a pedagogy of consilience and renewal in the United States and beyond. Because of time allotment, it is not possible to discuss the many complex, enmeshed "hows" that relate to the project. Significantly, a benefit of the model is that each class, professor, student, and citizen can craft his or her own way(s) of advancing a pedagogy of consilience and renewal.

Knowledge

In his engaging book *The Constitution of Knowledge*, Jonathan Rauch (2021) argues there is an “epistemic crisis” in America. The crisis stems from, among other things, our living in a world of disinformation, a loss of confidence in our elected officials and the news media, and tribal, clannish divisions between “us” versus “them,” all of which tamper with our “shared understanding that there are right and wrong ways to make knowledge” (p. 5). Why does this matter? It matters because, as Friedrich Hayek (1973) notes, “Civilization rests on the fact that we all benefit from knowledge we do not possess.” This signifies that a special kind of openness to new ideas and ways of thinking and being must obtain in diverse societies for human progress to occur. Otherwise, innovative solutions to human problems may be forestalled: solutions to climate change, ways of grappling with food deserts, water shortages, diseases, and germs, as well as a myriad of other scientific and humanitarian solutions “out there” just waiting to have their say and their sway (Norberg, 2020).

Some examples from the author’s repertoire about how we collectively benefit from contributions to society include the knowledge necessary for brilliant scientists to create vaccines for COVID-19 so we all can live whole and well again. Another example is the exquisite mathematical knowledge we gained from the sweet band of African American women who worked as human computers in the space industry to ensure successful launches into space. The work of their brilliant brains is memorialized in the movie, *Hidden Figures*. We are all heirs to their knowledge and the knowledge of countless others. The implication is that instructors and students should care about the role that substantive knowledge plays in persuading others in civil society, using argument as a commanding tool.

Cultivating in our students’ knowledge about knowledge construction and its uses should benefit society as a whole, with huge possibilities for renewal and excitement. Ben Sasse notes tellingly, “If we do not understand more fully how to discern truth from untruth,” we have a risk of getting to a place where we don’t have shared public facts” (qtd. in Rauch, 2021, p. 9). Research in these domains should not be ideologically driven, however. Rather, it should focus squarely on scholars and practitioners exploring what students know and understand about the constitution of knowledge during this moment of divisiveness. Cultivating this facet of the consilience quintile should pave the way for more creativity and human flourishing in North America. Research in this area should also help students understand more fully that the content of knowledge is the basis of argument and that knowing **what, how, and why** about knowledge construction just might facilitate more free inquiry, a basis for democratic practice.

Geography

In addition to promoting a pedagogy that enhances our understanding of common knowledge, it also behooves us to examine the interface between pedagogy and geography. Thirty years ago, in the small, agrarian town where this author grew up, there were basically two kinds of folk—teachers and preachers—and they lived side by side without geographical enclosures separating themselves from the have-nots. This aspect of the consilience of pedagogy and renewal model should help our students embrace common humanity by opening enclosures that keep some citizens locked out—away from access to knowledge and freedom. Using this component of the model, let us also envision studying the impact of geography on human knowledge and access to the good life in America.

As Egginton (2018) observes, “Where one lives, including public space and services, from streets to public education, is a natural outgrowth of one’s wealth, which in turn is a sign of self-worth, of effort, and of talent” (p. 146). Richard Reeves (2017) in *Dream Hoarders: How the American Upper Middle Class Is Leaving Everyone Else in the Dust, Why That Is a Problem, and What To Do About It*, also weighs in on the relationship that obtains between where one lives and educational outcomes. He writes,

For the upper middle class, zoning and wealth reinforce each other in a virtuous cycle. Zoning ordinances, which began life as explicitly racist tools, have become important mechanisms for incorporating class divisions into urban physical geographies. This is not a partisan point. If anything, zoning is more exclusionary in liberal cities. (p. 103)

The following are some key questions that we might explore with our students: What is the role of geography in promoting or retarding human renewal? To what extent, if any, do bounded and particular areas increase structural inequalities? How does the logic of diversity work in zoned, restrictive areas? What can human beings gain from such knowledge that might be useful in embracing a consilience of pedagogy and renewal? As well, let us envision professors and students across a wide swathe of America engaged in such study, from rural Bernice, Louisiana, to urban Baltimore, Maryland.

Critical Thinking

This component of a pedagogy of consilience and renewal emphasizes critical thinking, the linchpin of an engaged, open, and flourishing society. But what is the nature of critical thinking today in elementary schools, high schools, and college? Rauch (2021) uses the term “critical persuasion” to advance the compelling point that students, teachers, and other citizens are “In the business of contending, persuading, compromising—like the dynamic, creative, option-expanding form of compromise which Madison envisioned for politics” (p. 93).

Have we lost a beautiful capacity for embracing cognitive freedom? Since ancient times Westerners have taken the power of thinking well seriously. In Rome and Greece, the ability to speak and to listen critically to others’ points of view, and to argue persuasively, were deemed most useful and necessary. Around 465 B.C., a change of government occurred in Syracuse, Sicily, when a tyrant was replaced by a democratic form of government. In the aftermath, conflicting disputes arose over claims to property. Who owned what land prior to the defeat of tyranny? Did the land belong to Stephanoulus or to Stanopolus? Answering these central questions made speaking effectively in ancient Greece a necessity. Thereafter, in Syracuse, Corax devised a “system of rules” for arranging and arguing legal disputes. The rules helped citizens arrange and rearrange their ideas to win their cases in court (Golden et al., 1976, p. 9; Smith, 1921). At this complex and various technological moment in history, how are our students faring in such regards? Is critical thinking imperiled in the academy? If yes, how can a pedagogy of consilience and renewal act as a balm for healing and for sustaining good citizenly business?

Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is one of the bedrocks of American culture. In fact, while traveling in America in the 1830s, young Frenchman and social philosopher, Alexis de Tocqueville, commented on the nature of civic engagement in the country. If this interlaced pedagogy of consilience and renewal model works as envisioned, a component of civic engagement is necessary, because it interfaces with geography—a sense

of place and space—powerfully. As noted previously, currently geography—where one lives—separates different professional classes, ethnicities, races, faiths, incomes, and backgrounds from each other, and to a potential detriment to civil society.² Such separations of soil sever opportunities for citizens to share good, quality conversations in communal spaces. Recall that in 18th- and 19th-century England, all manner and manor of Britons met in Public Houses—later shortened to Pub—while cultivating the art of conversation. Historically, civic engagement flourished when people across different classes came together pleasantly and participated in clubs and organizations. Recently, however, Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam (2000) revealed in his impressive book, *Bowling Alone*, that there has been a decline in citizenly participation in clubs, churches, and other forms of organizations.

Considering America’s declining involvement in civic events, which is in part due to the presence of social media, to what extent are students today connecting together in face-to-face interactions where “we are able to see, and touch, and smell, and hear each other . . . We’re social creatures. We are meant to be in connection with one another in a safe, caring way, and when it’s mediated by a screen, that’s absolutely not there,” as Hilarie Cash (Hari, 2018, p. 18), a psychotherapist who founded reSTART, reminds us. What kinds of thoughts and feelings are being sacrificed today because civic engagement is waning? Is the academy, under the auspices of a pedagogy of consilience and renewal, a great, good place for more thoughtful reflection on human values?

Empathy

The last vital component of the quintile of a consilience of pedagogy and renewal is empathy. We need to also add a program of empathetic literacy—a pedagogy of empathy—to increase our fellow feelings for one another. Empathetic literacy (a pedagogy of empathy) is

knowledge and information-based skills that help global citizens respond to and manage intercultural encounters caringly and competently. It focuses on skills that students and other citizens need to develop empathy, factors that influence empathetic competence, and approaches to improving empathetic effectiveness. (Calloway-Thomas, 2010, p. 214)

As Danielle Allen (2004) notes, “The ancient Greeks encouraged one another to be hospitable to strangers on the ground that any of them might turn out to be a god in costume” (p. 49). Gambians in West Africa also encourage citizens to be kind to strangers. In fact, one is obliged to do so on the grounds that reciprocity matters. Middle Eastern culture also abounds with such fidelity and courtesies. The point is we do not want our fellow citizens to become strangers. And what better way to encourage this than fostering empathy, which is the ability to “learn what it is like to live by someone’s else’s light” (Calloway-Thomas, 2010, p. 14).

Empathy is the moral glue that holds civil society together; unless humans have robust habits of mind and reciprocal behavior that lead to empathy, society as we know it will crumble. Humans are united by the powers and possibilities of empathy. As Tom Kitwood (qtd. in Vetlesen, 1994, p. 9) observes about why empathy matters:

our countless small and unreflective actions toward each other, and the patterns of living and relating which each human being gradually creates. It is here that we are systemically respected or discounted, accepted or rejected, enhanced or diminished in our personal being. (p. 149)

Conclusion

The project proposed here exhorts us to use a pedagogy of consilience and renewal as a potent way of addressing some keen variables that challenge our polarized society today in order to strengthen community. It argues for an emphasis on the common good, “the good we share in common.”

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Notes

1. I am hugely indebted to American biologist Edward O. Wilson for calling my attention to the uses and intellectual virtues of the word consilience. Please see Wilson, E. O. (1999). *Consilience: The unity of knowledge*. Vintage Books.
2. Bell, T. & Calloway-Thomas discuss these concepts more fully in their forthcoming book, *Speak Out*, with SAGE.