

Radical Constructivism and the Decolonisation of Epistemology

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Upshot: Baron locates the decolonisation of the curriculum within the classroom, repurposing radically constructivist approaches to teaching and learning and giving them a sense of social and political urgency. The inclusion of students’ worldviews in the curriculum is best thought of as the beginning of a process rather than an end in itself. This leads beyond the pedagogic focus of Baron’s article, raising questions about the status of professional knowledge and whose terms equality is offered on.

1. Philip Baron’s reflexive approach to the decolonisation of the curriculum focuses on the processes of teaching and learning. This is the case even where content seems to be to the forefront, such as with the incorporation of the worldviews and life experience of participating students. The significance of this goes beyond situating and diversifying what is being taught in the course. Whatever new content is introduced through live student participation, this process is itself politically and socially significant, enabling the relationships between learners, curriculum, and tutors to be reformulated such that “all the participants are part of the knowledge-creation process” and “groups who were previously disregarded may be invited to actively engage” (§2).
2. In this focus on process, Baron’s approach is deeply aligned with radical constructivism, which Ernst von Glasersfeld (1990: 19) characterised as a theory of *knowing* rather than of *knowledge*. Indeed, it is striking how closely Baron’s approach coincides with radically constructivist attitudes to teaching and learning. Maintaining an environment conducive to conversation (§17), the need for learners to build new ideas in terms of what they already know (§10), and situating learning so that it is clear why it is useful (§§21ff) can each be advocated for entirely pedagogic reasons (cf. Glasersfeld 1995: 176ff). Baron’s explicitly political and social reasons for adopting these approaches give them a sense of urgency and relevance that is not always present where radical constructivism is introduced in more abstract or philosophical terms.
3. That common cause can be found between the decolonisation of the curriculum and radical constructivism should not be surprising. Radical constructivism challenges some of the assumptions that are at the root (hence its *radicalism*) of the Western tradition (§25) and, in so doing, undermines the privileging of that (and, indeed, any) worldview. Might one therefore position radical constructivism’s critique of objectivity as a project of decolonising epistemology? Perhaps, but there is reason to proceed cautiously, especially given that radical constructivism is itself located within Western thought, albeit as a form of counter-tradition (Glasersfeld 1990, 2007). In the same way that

introducing diversified content into the canon is not merely to balance it but to put in question how canonicity is and has been produced, principles such as the inclusion of the observer (§34) and the accompanying shift from hierarchy to heterarchy (§§24ff) must not be treated as ends in themselves but as ways to open up further questions.

4. The inclusion of students is only a first step. It is not just that they are included, but also a question of who is being included and who is not; what they are being included in; how, when, where and on whose terms this happens; and whether this might be a different experience for participants from different backgrounds. Baron is commendably specific in his article, but there are places where these questions go beyond the scope of his account. For instance, social justice may be addressed by “including the students’ worldviews in the classroom” (§2) only if this is done in a way where these worldviews enter on equal terms. This is less straightforward than it first appears. As philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend has articulated, when we speak of equality we often do so in ways that already reflect the dominance of particular discourses and groups:

“Equality, including equality of women and ‘racial’ equality, does not mean equality of traditions; *it means equality of access to one particular tradition* – the tradition of the White Man. White Liberals supporting the demand for equality have opened the promised land – but it is a promised land built according to their own specifications, filled with their own favourite playthings and accessible only in accordance with their particular requirements...”
(Feyerabend 1980: 14)

5. Thus, while the superiority of modern science is often assumed, it “*prevails not because of its comparative merits, but because the show has been rigged in its favour*” (Feyerabend 1978:102, italics original). This is in part a legacy of colonialism, where non-Western traditions have declined as a result of political suppression rather than on the basis of research or argument. Non-Western traditions have not been evaluated in fair terms:

“The sciences, it is said, are uniformly better than all alternatives – but where is the evidence to support this claim? Where, for example, are the control groups which show the uniform (and not only the occasional) superiority of Western scientific medicine over the medicine of the *Nei Ching*? Or over Hopi medicine? Such control groups need patients that have been treated in the Hopi manner, or in the Chinese manner using Hopi experts and experts in traditional Chinese medicine...” (Feyerabend 1980: 13)

6. Feyerabend’s critique can be extended to the context of engineering and technology in which Baron is writing. Much like medicine, engineering was instrumental to colonial expansion and in the development of the dominant discourse of Western society. The apparent successes of modern technology are successes *in terms of its own materialistic standards*. Its failures, like the ecological crisis, are perpetuated where they are thought of merely as problems still to be solved through the same techniques. That is, the assumptions under which professional fields such as engineering are taught are themselves in need of being subjected to critique.

7. This is an important consideration in the context of Baron’s reflexive approach, as professional skills are the one fixed point that has to be covered in the curriculum. This could become an unexamined dynamic shaping the conversations in the classroom. In

architectural education, for instance, it is difficult for a student to meet all the criteria unless they propose a suitably complex building. Yet, to propose a programmatic way of addressing a situation and *not building a building at all* is still a legitimate and sophisticated *architectural* strategy, albeit one that is not in the financial interests of the building industry. It is similarly a legitimate engineering strategy to reframe Baron's example of the earthing of metal shacks (§§21ff) to address other aspects of this situation, such as the prevalence of informal housing and the political and economic issues that underlie this. Such a path, however, may not cover the principles of earthing that are required by professional expectations.

8. Baron's reconciliation of his approach to assessment with professional expectations (§§6ff) is thus much more central than it at first appears. Established professional skills do not necessarily need to be unpicked, but their status is in as much need of being questioned as any other element of content if the diverse worldviews of students are to be taken seriously. The reflexive approach that Baron proposes could be used to do all this. It is, however, important to ask what purposes, motivations and power structures are at play, even within heterarchical forms of organisation. Reflexion, for instance, can operate conservatively, establishing self-reinforcing norms within the group. The politics of all this is therefore highly dependent on the particular tutors, who, while they may not have "unilateral power in the classroom" (§26), still occupy a privileged position, even in a conversational format (Sweeting 2014).

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