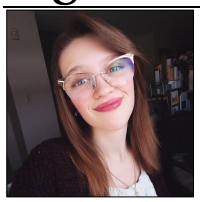
ISSN: 2325-3290 (online)
Dialogic Pedagogy
an International Online Journal

A Student's Response to Dr. Matusov's article, "A Student's Right to Freedom of Education"



Shonda Kitchen
Ambrose University, Canada

Abstract
This essay is a commentary on Dr. Matusov's article "A Student's Right to Freedom of Education", and it will reflect on Dr. Cresswell's and Dr. Dyck's technology-free classroom experiment as well as some of the thoughts and opinions expressed in Dr. Matusov's article. In particular, this essay will examine and raise some objections to Dr. Matusov's thoughts and opinions and argue for a more nuanced and tempered view of the nature of the student's right to freedom of education. The technology-free experiment and Dr. Matusov's objection to it will be explored and met with arguments in support of the experiment and the possible benefits of a technology-free learning environment. The remainder of the essay will largely consider Dr. Matusov's thoughts on the student's right to freedom of education and will offer arguments both for and against some of Dr. Matusov's thoughts expressed in his article. Finally, an argument for a more holistic and structured view of authority and freedom in education will be discussed, using some studies on the Finnish education system as an example of one approach to improving education.

Key words: education, open education, freedom, students, teachers, authority, technology.

Shonda Kitchen is an English Literature student in her third year at Ambrose University. She fell in love with reading and writing at an early age and has since filled many notebooks with words of her own. She enjoys both creative and academic writing and hopes to continue to grow as a poet and a scholar throughout her degree and beyond. Most importantly, she hopes that she never stops learning.

Earlier this year, during my winter semester at Ambrose University, I took part in a classroom experiment in which no technology was allowed. This experiment was under the direction of two professors from Ambrose University: Dr. Cresswell, Professor of Psychology, and Dr. Dyck, Assistant Professor of English Literature. The aim of this experiment was to determine how much technology, or a lack thereof, could influence the learning environment. Upon learning about this experiment, a friend of Dr. Cresswell's, Dr. Matusov, wrote an article in which he criticized the experiment, claiming that it restricted students' freedom and "[forced] the students and faculty not to use personal technology" (Matusov, 2020). In this response, I will address Dr. Matusov's critique of Dr. Cresswell and Dr. Dyck's technology-free experiment and comment on the other thoughts he expressed about education throughout his article.

Because I am in the English program at Ambrose University, I enrolled in Dr. Dyck's class on popular fiction, one of the two classes participating in the experiment. One of the most interesting and helpful things I have learned from some of my professors in the English program is that it is more beneficial to take notes by hand rather than on a laptop. In nearly all of my introductory classes, my professors told

us that recent studies (Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014) have shown that taking notes by hand encourages students to actively listen and write down in their own words what they think is important. This is because it is quite difficult to write at a quick enough pace to get everything from the lecture. Because of these studies, many of my professors strongly discouraged the use of laptops or tablets for note taking purposes in the classroom. I chose to take this advice and have since been committed to only taking notes by hand in all of my classes. Thus, when I learned that Dr. Dyck's class would be participating in the technology-free experiment, I did not feel it would affect me too much, if at all. I was already accustomed to leaving my laptop at home and keeping my phone tucked away in my backpack, on silent. I knew that all I needed to learn effectively was my notebook, a pen, and whatever novel or other material we would be discussing during the lecture. In this regard I did not feel that my freedoms were being restricted at all.

While I can understand Dr. Matusov's reservations about this technology-free experiment and the ways it could be restrictive, I feel that his criticism is perhaps too harsh. The experiment only involved two classes and took place during most of the semester, before we were interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In my small English class, I do not remember anyone raising any significant objections. The only time my fellow students objected to the experiment was when we had to write an in-class essay, which prompted some students to ask if they could use their laptops to write said essay. If any student felt a strong enough objection to the experiment, they had the freedom to drop the class altogether. I would also like to emphasize that the point of this experiment was to see how a lack of technology would impact a student's ability to learn. This is something which can only be tested by purposefully denying students access to technology. Throughout the semester, both classes were given surveys which asked students how they felt the absence of technology was impacting their learning. Although I am not in the Psychology or Behavioral Science programs at Ambrose University, my understanding is that this is a common trait of most studies. I would also argue that throughout the history of psychological studies, it has been a common practice to restrict or withhold something from the participants of a study, using such tactics as a control group or a placebo treatment, which allows researchers to compare data with other groups in a given study. Even today, as numerous COVID-19 vaccines are being tested around the world, some participants are being given placebo vaccines, without their knowledge, in order to give researchers a clearer picture as to what may help them in further developing the vaccine ("New Study Reveals Oxford Coronavirus Vaccine Produces Strong Immune Response," 2020). It appears that often new and helpful knowledge is acquired through a process of trial and error, and sometimes we cannot find good answers or solutions to our problems without some level of controlled experimentation and exploration. If the question is "what would happen if we removed this factor?" then the only way to find the answer is to remove the factor in question.

Having thus discussed the technology-free experiment, I will now address Dr. Matusov's thesis on the student's right to freedom of education. Upon reading the introduction to his article, I found his thesis and thoughts on the matter to be both interesting and somewhat radical. On one hand, I believe I do see the value of a student's freedom and autonomy in education. It is true that most students do not take well to the feeling that they are being forced to learn. There are plenty of children who are not always excited to go to school first thing in the morning, especially when they know that they are required to stay there for roughly eight hours with restricted freedom. Indeed, I can even remember how much I disliked waking up early in the morning when I was attending elementary school and high school. On top of this initial dislike, students are forced to sit still and listen to a lesson for hours at a time, sometimes to things that they have little to no interest in. And when they are not listening, they are filling out workbooks and working on projects. Though the level of course difficulty increases as the students advance through the years, this is still something that can be difficult for students of any age. This is largely why having regular recesses are important, so that students can get some of their pent-up energy out before returning to class. But even

with recess time, it can still be frustrating for a young child to be required to do something for hours that they would rather not do. I have heard enough of my peers complain about school over the years, along with complaints of my own, to know that this current system of public education is not instilling a love of learning in many young people. If anything, it only seems to promote a habit of simply doing the bare minimum to pass, as students wait for the school year to end. We know that this should not be the norm. As someone who has now attended university and has had the pleasure of being in a program I am deeply interested in, I have come to love school and learning in a far more fulfilling way than I ever have before. It upsets me to think that our education system in North America seems to have a penchant for killing a student's love of learning and natural curiosity.

After considering these things, I still find aspects of Dr. Matusov's thesis to be too extreme. When he insists that "it is students who are the principal authors of their own education" and that "education must occur on the student's terms because education is primarily the personal business of the student", I feel that perhaps he has gone a touch too far (Matusov, 2020). While it is true that students ought to be involved in their education, and that it is largely the prerogative of the student to choose how much they will get out of their education, I think education is more nuanced than Dr. Matusov's initial claims. I would agree with him that education should not be the business of "society, state, taxpayers… economy… democracy, patriotism, nationalism, [and] healthcare", as these things are, as he puts it, "secondary or auxiliary for education" (Matusov, 2020). These external powers, ideas, and people should not have direct involvement in determining what is suitable for a curriculum because they likely do not have the proper qualifications for making such decisions or judgements. They may have ulterior motives or personal agendas that they would like to impose on the impressionable young minds of children, or they may be otherwise ignorant about what is effective and helpful for education in general.

The point at which I disagree with Dr. Matusov is when he includes educational experts and teachers in his list of people whose involvement in defining education is secondary. I would argue for a more nuanced, interconnected, and holistic approach to determining who gets to define education. The education of the student should be the primary goal of education, but education does not happen in a vacuum. Creating a curriculum and designing an educational system requires the work of educational experts and teachers who have gone through higher education themselves and have dedicated their lives to delivering quality education to students. Students depend on the valuable hard work of these educational experts and teachers for their education. A teacher is one who simultaneously serves and leads students in their learning as they teach, listening to the concerns of students and answering their questions. This is when education starts to become more interconnected. Just as the knowledge and hard work of educational experts and teachers are vital to education, so too are the voices of the students. For a curriculum or educational system to be effective, it is important to take into account the opinions and needs of the students, as they are the ones receiving the education. An important distinction to make, however, is that the students are not the experts. Students do not yet have the knowledge or experience to judge what will be most beneficial for their education. They are still children, and therefore require a trusted, educated adult to guide them as they grow.

I found Dr. Matusov's thoughts on what he calls the critical examination approach to education to be one of the most interesting parts of this article. Critical examination can be a beautiful and extremely helpful approach to education, and in everyday life in general. In my own life and education, I find it to be quite healthy, thought provoking, and enjoyable to regularly assess different concepts and ideas critically as I grow in both my personal character and in my educational pursuits. I would argue that it is a good thing to have a desire for our students to be critical of their beliefs and learn to engage in ideas different from

their own, as it has the potential to open up their worldview and lead them to the multitude of exciting new ideas that any field of study has to offer. One could say that this is one of the foundational ideas of education to begin with. To learn new things and explore them critically is, I think, quite a valuable skill to have both in and out of the classroom. I think I would agree with Dr. Matusov when he warns that teachers should not "lock the student into critical examination" (Matusov, 2020). To use the practice of critical examination in a manipulative or forceful way would, in my opinion, go against the very principal of critical examination. By forcing critical examination onto the student, the teacher is not helping the student to explore and engage with new ideas, but rather pushing an agenda on them in a way that is likely not beneficial to learning. Critical examination works best when the student decides to engage in it, either in response to a new idea or a thought-provoking question. Along with this, if a student is genuinely interested in a given topic, then the process of critical examination will be made far easier, and they will likely come to grasp the new concept in a more constructive and helpful way. Perhaps a better approach would be one in which the teacher gently introduces new ideas and asks students if they have any questions or feedback on the topic. In this approach, teachers ought to be planting seeds in the minds of their students. These seeds may remain dormant for a time, but they have the potential to be nourished and eventually grow into further knowledge later, when the student is ready and has chosen to do so. A teacher can only do so much as they plant their seeds of knowledge. The rest is up to the student to decide whether they will engage in the growth process or not. In this way both the teacher and the student retain their freedom in the educating process. The teacher has the freedom to teach the lessons which they feel are important, and the student has the freedom to either engage in or ignore these lessons.

I appreciated Dr. Matusov's method of using the curricular map, giving his students the freedom to choose certain topics for their class. However, I find myself thinking that there is still a place for a more formally structured curriculum. For example, when I enrolled in a class on medieval literature, I expected that I would be taught by a professor with knowledge on this topic that would be superior to mine. I trusted that the texts which my professor chose for us to read and study were ones which he felt would be the most important and helpful for learning about medieval literature. However, in that class we did have some discussions about the syllabus, our schedule, and as a result several lectures and readings were changed accordingly. I would argue that there can be room for both a formalized and flexible curriculum, trusting the expertise of the professor while also considering the desires and concerns of the students. I can also see the value of this curricular map approach, as it would entice students to be more involved in their learning. If they have the freedom to choose a topic which they are interested in, then they will likely be more motivated to study and engage with the educational material. However, I do not think that traditional, formalized curriculums are entirely bad. A good curriculum gives structure to a class and gives students some idea as to what they should expect to learn. Also, it is sometimes most beneficial to learn things in a certain order, such as learning the alphabet before learning how to read and write. I think that there are some things which are beneficial and necessary for every student to learn, such as reading, writing, math, science, and history. What if a student was in a class covering historical events of the 20th century, using the curricular map concept, and never got around to discussing the two world wars or the Holocaust because the students never wanted to learn about these events? If you were to meet such a student who had never learned about these important historical events, we would probably call them ignorant and wonder what went wrong in their education.

I find myself strongly disagreeing with Dr. Matusov's notion that a student's participation in education should not be mandatory. I would argue that students do not necessarily always know what they need or what is good for them. Anyone who has been around children for any length of time will quickly discover that they frequently do not want to do things that we know are good for them, such as eating

vegetables so that they are properly nourished, or going to bed on time so that they get enough sleep. While they are young children, they are extremely inexperienced with all fields of knowledge, hardly knowing how to read and write. It is important for their young minds to learn the basics, and to challenge themselves and expand their minds as they grow older. It is also important for them to learn these basics so that they can properly function in society. When I was learning math in elementary school, I did not enjoy it in the least. If I had had the option of leaving my math class, I would have gladly taken it. But now that I am older and have worked a few retail jobs in which I have had to count money, I am extremely grateful that I was taught the basics of math. And that is only one small area in which I use my knowledge of math. I cannot imagine how much more difficult my life would be if I had not learned how to count, add, multiply, and the like. This is comparable to the example which Dr. Matusov used in his article, wherein a former student of the unusual Summerhill school never learned how to read and write because of his immature decision to never attend classes. He lived most of his adult life barely knowing how to read and write, and only decided to finally learn these skills when he felt embarrassed that he could not spell the word 'caravan' for his Japanese employers. I feel that this is a glaring failure of this man's education, as it did not give him the benefit of being properly prepared for adult life. How can we say this form of education is good when it leaves its students crippled by an inability to use one of the most basic skills? How much time could this man have saved if he had simply learned how to read and write when he was young? This is exactly why young children need proper guidance and education, as it gives them a foundation of skills that will enable them to function as an adult.

I also feel that this approach teaches children that if something becomes difficult, they should give up rather than persevere. Perhaps it is all well and good for a child to give up on learning a new skill while they are young and being taken care of by adults. But when that child grows up to become an adult themselves, they will soon find that when life becomes difficult, they will no longer have the same option of simply walking out of the classroom. We must all learn at some point that we will have to do certain things in life that we would rather not do, and that this is a normal part of life. Learning new things may naturally take some students out of their comfort zone, but the best part about this is that this can be done in a safe learning environment, with a teacher who can guide them and answer their questions. I also feel that it is important for education to challenge students in a safe and healthy way, as it not only promotes growth in their character, but it also teaches them to take risks, explore, and learn how to navigate uncomfortable situations. As children grow older, they will quickly discover that the world will not always cater to their desires, and they will have to learn how to adapt and thrive when they are faced with the challenges of adult life.

Reading this article made me curious about other educational systems, and how our own system in North America could be improved. I have seen several stories in the media lately about the success of the Finnish education system, so I decided to do some research and find out why Finland's education system was getting so much attention. I found out that Finnish students have been one of the top performers in the domains of science, reading, and math in a program called PISA (The Programme for International Student Assessment) since its inception in 2000 (Ustun & Eryilmaz, 2018). In one study, the researchers concluded that there was not one individual factor that accounted for this success, but rather a system of interrelated factors (Ustun & Eryilmaz, 2018). The study focused mainly on Finland's emphasis on educational equity, long term educational policy, culture of trust, the reading habit of Finnish people, and a high level of cooperation as some of the main aspects responsible for the success of the Finnish education system (Ustun & Eryilmaz, 2018). Perhaps one of the most intriguing things about the Finnish education system is that their students receive the shortest total learning time among all the participating countries in PISA (Ustun & Eryilmaz, 2018). This fact indicates that although Finnish students spend the least amount

of time in the classroom, they appear to be receiving quite an efficient education, given their outstanding achievement in PISA. This also likely means that students are spending more time doing other things, such as enjoying time with their family and friends, exploring their world through play, and engaging in other hobbies. The shorter class times of Finnish schools allows students to enrich their lives in many ways, which probably makes them better, more focused, and more well-rounded students in the classroom.

According to the Finnish Basic Education Act, the three main objectives of Finnish education are "to provide them (pupils) with knowledge and skills needed in life… to promote civilization and equality in society… [and] to secure adequate equity in education throughout the country" (Ustun & Eryilmaz, 2018). In light of these objectives, we can see that the Finnish education system is concerned with equipping each student with necessary skills, improving society through the proper education of its citizens, and ensuring that every child has the opportunity to be educated regardless of their socioeconomic status. I found myself to be quite astonished and impressed with these principles. This is an education system which is concerned about the wellbeing of both its students and its society as a whole and sees the inherent connection between the two. By contrast, it seems that our education system in North America does not always appear to care about the wellbeing of its students. Instead, it only seems to care about how well they perform on a standardized test, merely teaching students how to memorize facts and survive education, rather than nourishing them with knowledge and enabling them to thrive in education. This brings us to yet another set of highlights of Finnish education. According to this study, Finnish education appears to have a focus on flexibility and diversity rather than standardization, an emphasis on broad knowledge which includes aspects of individual growth and learning, and a culture of trust through professionalism (Ustun & Eryilmaz, 2018). This indicates that education in Finland likely favours creativity and individuality in its students, along with a general interest in providing students with adequate knowledge and skills needed for both personal growth and educational success. And, unlike the unconventional practices of the Summerhill school mentioned in Dr. Matusov's article, Finland's education system, which spans over ten years, is compulsory (Ustun & Eryilmaz, 2018). Considering Dr. Matusov's feelings on compulsory education, I find it very interesting that Finland's students appear to be doing so well in an educational system in which it is mandatory to attend classes. I feel that perhaps the problem with a lot of Western education is not that it is mandatory or uses a standard, imposed curriculum, but rather that it seems to lack the consistent care and consideration that the Finnish education system appears to be using.

Reading Dr. Matusov's article on the student's freedom of education, and writing this response, has been an incredibly thought provoking and informative experience. At times I found myself agreeing with Dr. Matusov, seeing some of the value in his arguments. I think it is true that the education system in North America has largely become too rigid and standardized and leaves little room for creativity and critical thinking. But on the other hand, I also found myself vehemently disagreeing with other parts of Dr. Matusov's article, especially when he argued that education should not be mandatory, and that the student should be the primary authority on their education. I felt that it was simply too extreme and unhelpful in finding a good solution to some of the issues with the current education system. I do not think we can solve the extreme standardization of this system with the extreme individual freedom that Dr. Matusov proposed in his article. After looking at the Finnish education system, learning how different their ways were from ours, and seeing how successful they are with it, I am inclined to believe that a compromise is a more likely solution. There is room for both formal curriculums and individual creativity, for both traditional educational design and the unique voice of the students. Instead of viewing the educational process as a dichotomy in which it is teachers versus students, perhaps it will be more helpful to view it as an interconnected, dialogic process in which both sides work together towards the common goal of giving students the best education possible.

References

Matusov, E. (2020). A student's and a teacher's right to freedom of education. *Dialogic Pedagogy: An International Online Journal, 8 (2020)*, SF1-SF28. doi:10.5195/dpj.2020.356

Mueller, P. A., & Oppenheimer, D. M. (2014). The Pen Is Mightier Than the Keyboard: Advantages of Longhand Over Laptop Note Taking. Psychological Science, 25(6), 1159–1168. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797614524581

New study reveals Oxford coronavirus vaccine produces strong immune response. (2020, July 20). Oxford Vaccine Group. https://www.ovg.ox.ac.uk/news/new-study-reveals-oxford-coronavirus-vaccine-produces-strong-immune-response

Ustun, U., & Eryilmaz, A. (2018). Analysis of Finnish Education System to question the reasons behind Finnish success in PISA. Studies in Educational Research and Development, 2(2), 93–114.

New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.

This journal is published by the University Library System, University of Pittsburgh as part of its D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program and is cosponsored by the University of Pittsburgh Press.