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Reconsidering the Design-Based Education

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Abstract

Education is often conceptualized as a "design" process—that is, a system in which inputs and outcomes are logically linked. We are preoccupied with the belief that by preparing curricula, developing teaching materials, and employing appropriate pedagogical approaches, we can reliably achieve educational "achievement goals." This paper refers to such a perspective as "Design-Based Education."

Recently, the idea of fostering "subjectivity" through education has gained attention. This refers to nurturing the "subjectivity" required for students to develop the "ability and will" to act responsibly in uncertain times. However, much of this discourse overlooks the generative and transformative aspects of subjectivity. Subjectivity is not merely something that is deliberately expanded, shaped, or developed in stages; it can undergo sudden, dynamic transformations beyond the control of either educators or learners. Such transformations are not rare. It is in this inherent "uncertainty" of education that its unique significance and value lie.

There are limits to designing and structuring education based solely on utility and rationality. Education entails a dimension of "impossibility." It is an indefinite and unpredictable interaction among living human beings, and as such it often "does not succeed." This paper offers a brief discussion aimed at critically rethinking "Design-Based Education" while remaining grounded in this fundamental reality.

Key words: Design-Based Education, subjectivity, Ability and the Will, metric fixation, "Impossibility" of Education

1 "Design" to "be able to do".

Some time ago—probably over the past few years—university teachers have been

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required to include "achievement goals" in their course syllabi, phrased with the student as the grammatical subject. For example, one of the courses I teach states: "Students will be able to examine a wide range of educational and human-related issues from philosophical and historical perspectives."

I believe I have set a rather far-reaching, abstract, and ambiguous "achievement goal." Although this goal makes a nearly meaningless statement about the specific "abilities" (what one should be able to do) to be acquired, I still hope that such a goal can be achieved. Nevertheless, I continue to feel uneasy about the requirement to write these "achievement goals" in the format "to be able to ~," using the learner as the subject.

To achieve these "achievement goals," the course content is broken down into detailed components, each allocated to one of the 15 class sessions, along with designated outside-of-class preparation and review. This structure implies that if students attend all 15 sessions and engage in the corresponding study tasks, they will accomplish the "achievement goals" and thereby "become able to do" something.

A syllabus is a document that describes the educational content (learning/study) of a class in a "designed" way. Unfortunately, even if students take my class 15 times, they will not be able to achieve the "achievement goals" as described above. Rather, it is impossible to measure whether or not the abstract "achievement goals" have been achieved by objective measures.

It could, of course, be argued that the way the goals are set is flawed. If more concrete goals were used—ones measurable by test scores—it might be possible to align class content accordingly and ensure their achievement. Alternatively, a rubric may make it possible to evaluate abstract "achievement goals" in a concrete and objective assessment method. Such research on curriculum design and refinement of evaluation methods is meaningful, but it is not the subject of this report.

This report instead aims to discuss the "Design-Based Education" as represented in syllabi, an approach that presumes a correlation between educational efforts and learning outcomes, and to propose a fundamental problem (a "messy topic") for rethinking this assumption.

2 Transformation of "Subject" with "the Ability and the Will"

Children's "Subjectivity" is being touted. For example, "Proactive, Interactive, and Authentic Learning", "an attitude of proactive learning", "A proactive attitude towards learning with a diverse range of people". The concepts of "subjectivity" and "proactive"

that appear in these texts are not always clear in their meanings, and are used with changing meanings depending on the context. And their use in policy statements, recommendations, and reports from Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) and Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) has had a significant impact on educational discourse in Japanese schools.

In contemporary educational discourse, "subjectivity" is treated as a type of ability that can be developed through education. The reason why predicates such as "develop," "grow," and "draw out" are used is that it is considered to be something that can be cultivated and developed through education.

The concept of forming a "subject" through education from an existence that has not yet become a "subject" is a basic motif of modern education, but in recent years, emphasis has been placed especially on "subjectivity" as an "ability" that can be achieved.

The concept of "agency" appears in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD's) "Education 2030" project. Sometimes translated as "agency in action," this concept is based on the principle that students possess both the ability and the will to positively influence their own lives and the world around them. It is defined as "the capacity to set a goal, reflect, and act responsibly to effect change" (OECD 2019: p. 2).

Here, it is assumed that the student has the "ability and will" beforehand. Thus, it is different from the image of "subjecting" an entity that does not yet have the "ability and will". In a future in which the existence of beings who already have clear "ability and will" will become 'VUCA' (a business term that stands for volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous), the ability required to realize "The Future We Want" is called "Agency".

Shun Shirai explains that the "agency" described in "Education 2030" has both goal-oriented and process-oriented dimensions: "the aspect of developing the competency of agency, and the aspect of developing agency as a process to develop the competency" (Shirai 2020: p. 88). If we substitute "subjectivity" for "agency" and "ability" for "competency," we can say there are two dimensions: the development of subjectivity as an ability, and subjectivity as a process for developing ability.

Subjectivity itself is to be nurtured as an ability, enabling students to learn responsibly toward a desired future by setting their own learning goals. The development of "agency" = "subjectivity" = "ability" as described is seen as necessary for navigating a VUCA world.

Let us now return to the syllabus example mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

The readers of the syllabus are, first of all, the students of the class. The syllabus assumes that the students have the "ability and will" to learn. The syllabus clearly states

to the students the goals they are expected to achieve and the "abilities" they are expected to develop after 15 lessons of the class.

The already "subjective" being quantitatively expands his/her own "ability" through learning. They are able to increase the number of items that can be listed on their resume by acquiring credits and qualifications in line with the learning objectives that they have "subjectively" set for themselves. If we assume such a learning model, the items listed in the syllabus are reasonable.

In such an educational model, the state of the student ("subject") after taking a class is imagined as becoming "able to do" certain things. Naturally, however, the transformation of the "subject" beyond the boundaries of one's imagination cannot be imagined. The qualitative transformation of the "subject" beyond imagination cannot be explicitly shown to the educated person prior to receiving education, and even if it could be shown, it would be impossible for the educated person to understand.

To encounter knowledge beyond one's lived experience, to engage in previously unconsidered dialogue, and to perceive the world through a radically new lens—these are transformative experiences. In such moments, the learner's prior perspective is dismantled, and a new self emerges. This dynamic transformation of the subject through education (learning) cannot be described in a "designed" way.

The educator approaches the educated person with intention ("by design"), transmitting knowledge and skills, and attempting to transform the educated person in a "preferable" direction. First, the goal is to become "able to do" something.

However, such efforts often "fail." It is difficult to transform the educated person (to form "ability") as the educator wishes. If the transforming phase of the process is the formation or transformation of the "subject," it is even more difficult to be able to operate in a way that is manipulative.

It is common for learners not to change in the ways educators envision. Likewise, it is also common for learners, who are assumed to engage with "ability and will," to learn something unintended, or to learn nothing at all.

When I asked students who took my classes to write their "reflections" on the class, I found many comments that they were strongly impressed by "asides" that were not included in the syllabus or textbooks. Many do not even recall what the teacher formally explained. These incidents may appear to be "failures" of "designed education," but they suggest that students sometimes learn more (or less) than what was intended, outcomes that may extend beyond the "achievement goals" of the course.

And that, simply, is the point. The true value of education lies in this uncertainty, in the sudden, unpredictable transformation of the learner that exceeds the designs,

intentions, or imagination of both educator and student.

3 Attitude of Undertaking the "Impossibility" of Education

If the purpose of education is set exclusively on "being able to do", then those beings who "are not able to do", no matter how many efforts are made, will be excluded from the subject of education. Whether it is a concrete "ability" such as reading, writing or calculating, or an abstract "ability" such as "subjectivity" or "agency", there will continue to be those who cannot achieve 'ability' through "designed education" (e.g. those with serious "disabilities"). Rather, we can say that by setting educational 'achievement goals', we continue to produce beings who cannot reach the 'goals.' We have a history of creating beings who do not have the "ability and will" ourselves, separating them under the name of protection, discriminating against them, excluding them, and erasing them from existence.

Moreover, if the focus is on efficient "becoming to be able," the acquisition and augmentation of "ability" may not take place through texts and oral traditions, but in a more certain and direct way, for example, through the development of genetic engineering and human engineering, or through medical interventions. In these cases, changes are made directly to the human being to ensure capability. This represents the reduction of "impossibility" in education.

The idea of human modification through genetic modification and medical procedures, however science fiction-like, is similarly fictional, as is the "design-based education" portrayed in the syllabus.

In recent years, education and schooling have increasingly been discussed in business terms: the PDCA cycle, accountability, quality assurance, selection, and focus. If education is practiced as a business transaction aimed at developing "ability," then "rationality" and "usefulness" become essential criteria. However, as mentioned above, education does not "succeed" in the same way as a business transaction. In a business situation, it is impossible to assume that you will not get the goods you paid for, but in education, such "uncertainty" often becomes apparent. Education and business cannot be discussed analogously.

In his book, Jerry Z. Muller critically discusses the pathology of "metric fixation" in modern organizations. According to Muller, "metric fixation" is the belief that it is possible and desirable to replace judgment, acquired through personal experience and talent, with numerical indicators of comparative performance based upon standardized

data (metrics); that making such metrics public (transparent) ensures that institutions are actually carrying out their purpose (accountability); and that the best way to motivate people within these organizations is by attaching rewards and penalties to their measured performance, rewards that are either monetary (pay-for-performance) or reputational (rankings) (Muller 2019: p. 18).

Educational activities cannot all be quantitatively measured and evaluated. However, those who fall into the "metric fixation" cannot admit this fact and continue to develop new measurement standards one after another. They seem simply convinced that they can achieve higher "goals" by providing incentives for measurable performance based on clearly defined evaluation criteria. "Design-Based Education" is a manifestation of the pathology of "metric fixation."

There is nothing negative about conceiving education in a "designed" way. The educator is performing educational work with the goal of "becoming able to do" and the learner is also trying to "become able to do." Measuring "ability" can also be meaningful.

However, after fully recognizing the significance of "being able to do" and "being measurable," it also seems important to recognize their limitations and have an attitude of acceptance of "not being able to do."

This means not fixating on achievement goals centered solely on ability development; not becoming trapped in the binary of "Success/Failure" defined by the "Design-Based Education"; and instead focusing on what is rendered invisible by "metric fixation." It requires standing before the foundational principles and ethics of education, which encompass uncertainty and impossibility, and reexamining the prevailing logic of "Design-Based Education," one governed by notions of utility and rationality, without submitting to political and economic imperatives.

Education is an indefinite and uncertain process between living human beings. For this reason, it often "does not succeed." This paper is grounded in that obvious yet essential truth.

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