

Open-minded inquiry

Helping Students Assess Their Thinking

by William Hare

Abstract

This is a brief guide to the ideal of open-minded inquiry by way of a survey of related notions. Making special reference to the educational context, the aim is to offer teachers an insight into what it would mean for their work to be influenced by this ideal, and to lead students to a deeper appreciation of open-minded inquiry. From assumptions to zealotry, the glossary provides an account of a wide range of concepts in this family of ideas, reflecting a concern and a connection throughout with the central concept of open-mindedness itself. An intricate network of relationships is uncovered that reveals the richness of this ideal; and many confusions and misunderstandings that hinder a proper appreciation of open-mindedness are identified.

Introduction

Many people would agree with John Dewey and Bertrand Russell that open-mindedness is one of the fundamental aims of education, always elusive but eminently worth pursuing. For Dewey, it is the childlike attitude of wonder and interest in new ideas coupled with a determination to have one's beliefs properly grounded; and it is vitally important because we live in a world that is characterized by constant change. For Russell, open-mindedness is the virtue that prevents habit and desire from making us unable or unwilling to entertain the idea that earlier beliefs may have to be revised or abandoned; its main value lies in challenging the fanaticism that comes from a conviction that our views are absolutely certain. A review of certain key ideas provides a clearer sense of the dimensions of the ideal of open-mindedness for all those who are determined to make this aim central to their work as teachers. What follows is a road map to the terrain which surrounds the idea of open-minded inquiry.

Glossary

Assumptions: Always potentially problematic when they remain invisible. Not being properly aware of the beliefs we take for granted, we are in no position to consider what is to be said for or against them. What we presuppose about the abilities of our students, about what is worth learning in our subject, about the nature of knowledge, about the teacher/student relationship, about suitable pedagogical strategies, and so on, affects our decisions as teachers, but these ideas escape our scrutiny. The open-minded teacher tries to uncover such ruling prepossessions, as Dewey calls them, and subject them to critical examination. Hidden assumptions of this kind are not, of course,

to be confused with assumptions we consciously make in order to see what follows if they are regarded as true.

Bias: Often mistakenly equated with simply having an opinion or a preference. An opinion, however, that results from an impartial review of the evidence would precisely merit being seen as unbiased. Similarly, a preference for reviewing evidence in a fair-minded manner before drawing conclusions is not a bias in favor of impartiality; it is a determination to avoid bias. A biased view distorts inquiry because factors have entered in (favoritism, ignorance, omission, corruption, misplaced loyalty, threats, and so on) that undermine a fair examination. Open-minded teachers seek to avoid bias in their teaching, or to compensate for biases that experience tells them they have a tendency to slip into, except when they deliberately present a biased perspective in order to stimulate open-minded reflection.

Critical Receptiveness: Russell's term for the attitude which makes a virtue of openness to ideas and experience while guarding against sheer mindlessness. Open-mindedness would not be an intellectual virtue if it implied a willingness to accept an idea regardless of its merits. Ideas must be given due consideration, of course, unless we already have good reason to believe that they are worthless, but the open-minded person is ready to reject an idea that cannot withstand critical appraisal. There may be good reason in the context of teaching, of course, to postpone critical scrutiny temporarily so that the ideas in question are properly understood and appreciated before difficulties and objections are raised, and to ensure that mutual respect and trust will allow people to entertain challenges to their views.

Dogmatism: Not to be thought of as equivalent to having a firm view but rather a stubbornly inflexible one that disrupts inquiry. An open-minded person may have a firm conviction, yet be fully prepared to reconsider it if contrary evidence begins to emerge. The dogmatist fails on this score, regarding the belief as having been laid down by an authority that cannot be disputed. People may seek the crutch of dogma, as Dewey puts it, but an open-minded teacher challenges such tendencies by ensuring that claims and theories remain open to critical review and are not seen as fixed and final, beyond all possibility of further thought.

Expertise: No one has the ability to make an independent and critical judgment about every idea, with the result that we must all, in some circumstances, rely on expert opinion. Experts, however, are not infallible, and some prove to be only experts in name. The open-minded person remains alive to these possibilities so as to avoid falling into a dogmatic conviction or being duped. Russell's advice remains relevant and needs to be applied to the teacher's own presumed expertise: When the experts are agreed, the opposite opinion cannot be certain. When they are not agreed, no opinion is certain. When the experts think the evidence is insufficient, we should suspend judgment.

Fallibility: The idea that our beliefs are subject to error and liable to be falsified. If we reject absolute certainty as unattainable, fallibilism allows us to view our beliefs as being well-supported and warranted in terms of presently available evidence and current

theories, but always subject to revision in the light of further evidence and reflection. Our beliefs are provisional and tentative, and the open-minded teacher attempts to convey this view to students and to offset any inclination to think that what is called knowledge is settled for all time; but such fallibilism does not entail outright skepticism where any possibility of achieving knowledge is simply dismissed.

Gullibility: The state in which we are so ready to believe that we are easily taken in by false claims and spurious ideas. Something is too good to be true, but it is regarded as true nevertheless. The desire to be open-minded is overwhelmed by a flood of nonsense and deception against which the person has insufficient critical defenses. Wishful thinking, greed, persuasive advertising, ignorance, and sheer naiveté all contribute to a situation in which a person is easily taken advantage of. As Carl Sagan observes, a great openness to ideas needs to be balanced by an equally strong skeptical spirit. Being well informed combined with the ability to think critically is the chief defense against credulity.

Humility: Recognizing one's own limitations and liability to error, and avoiding the arrogance sometimes displayed by teachers. Open-minded teachers submit their ideas to the critical reactions of their students, and they avoid the mistake of thinking that any superior knowledge they possess, as compared to the students', confers on them infallibility or omniscience. They acknowledge the risk that they may be shown to have made a mistake. Dewey rightly emphasizes, however, that humility does not mean that the teacher should think that he or she has no more expertise than the student and abandon whatever insights and wisdom can be brought to the teaching situation.

Indoctrination: Not to be identified with every form of teaching, but rather with the kind of teaching that tries to ensure that the beliefs acquired will not be re-examined, or with pedagogical methods that in fact tend to have such a result. Indoctrination tends to lock the individual into a set of beliefs that are seen as fixed and final; it is fundamentally inconsistent with open-minded teaching. R. M. Hare suggests a helpful test for open-minded teachers who wonder whether or not their own teaching may be drifting in the direction of indoctrination: How pleased are you when you learn that your students are beginning to question your ideas?

Judgment: Unlike sheer guesswork, judgment utilizes information to support a tentative factual claim that goes beyond the available evidence. Unlike ex-cathedra pronouncements, judgment draws on information, together with general principles, to determine what ought to be done or what value something has. Open-minded teachers bear in mind that their judgments rest on limited information or even on misinformation; that we need to be willing to suspend judgment when the evidence is insufficient; that the judgment we make may need to be revisited in the light of subsequent experience and reflection; and that others, drawing on the same evidence and the same general principles, may well reach different conclusions that we need to consider. La Rochefoucauld's observation is salutary concerning our own open-mindedness: Everyone finds fault with his memory, but none with his judgment.

Knowledge: Stephen Jay Gould speaks of certain ideas being "confirmed to such a degree that it would be perverse to withhold provisional consent." This is a useful way for open-minded teachers to think of knowledge. It stops well short of identifying knowledge with apodictic certainty; but it avoids the fashionable and debilitating skepticism that prefers to speak of "knowledge", rather than knowledge, on the grounds that no one really knows anything. Dewey wisely recommends teachers involving students in the making of knowledge at school so as to open their minds to the realization that certain ideas deserve to be thought of as knowledge rather than mere opinion or guesswork.

Listening: Not to be thought of as passive and unquestioning, but rather as intimately connected to the open-minded outlook. Good listening involves really trying to connect with another person's ideas in order to understand them and consider their merits, what Russell calls a kind of hypothetical sympathy. It carries with it the risk that one's views will turn out to be faulty in some way, requiring revision or rejection in an open-minded appraisal, and demands a certain amount of courage. Open-minded teachers listen to what is said, to how it is said, and to what is not said; and they are able and willing to limit their own contributions so as to give appropriate recognition to the voices of their students.

Manner: It is not just what we say and do as teachers that matters with respect to our claim to be open-minded, but also the atmosphere we create, the tone we set, our demeanor and body language, and the attitudes we convey. All of this can make it far clearer to students than any verbal declaration that a genuine engagement with ideas is encouraged. Dewey speaks of the "collateral learning" that goes on in classrooms, especially the formation of attitudes on the part of students, and a major influence here is the manner in which teachers go about their work.

Neutrality: Not to be seen as a pedagogical principle, but rather as a useful pedagogical strategy, giving students an opportunity to develop their own opinions before coming to know what the teacher's opinions are — if the teacher decides to reveal his or her views at all. Neutrality, in the sense of a teacher trying never to disclose his or her views, is not a necessary condition of being open-minded. The teacher's manner may well reveal that his or her declared views are open for discussion and are not being presented in a dogmatic fashion. Confusion about teacher neutrality often results from drawing a general conclusion about open-mindedness from the fact that "keeping an open mind" on an issue typically means not having yet made up one's mind and, therefore, being neutral.

Open-mindedness: The central concept in this family of ideas. Open-mindedness is an intellectual virtue that involves a willingness to take relevant evidence and argument into account in forming or revising our beliefs and values, especially when there is some reason why we might resist such evidence and argument, with a view to arriving at true and defensible conclusions. It means being critically receptive to alternative possibilities, being willing to think again despite having formed an opinion, and sincerely trying to avoid those conditions and offset those factors which constrain and distort our

reflections. The attitude of open-mindedness is embedded in the Socratic idea of following the argument where it leads and is a fundamental virtue of inquiry.

Propaganda: A one-sided, biased presentation of an issue, trading on emotional appeals and a wide range of rhetorical devices in order to override critical assessment and secure conviction. The propagandist has found the truth and has no interest in encouraging others to engage in genuine inquiry. Russell distinguishes the educator from the propagandist in terms of the former caring for the students on their own account, not viewing them as simply potential soldiers fighting for a cause. The challenge to open-minded teachers is to provide students with the skills to recognize and cope with propaganda, and to refrain from propaganda themselves even though a particular cause may seem important enough to justify it.

Questions: Some questions discourage critical inquiry by merely seeking answers deemed to be correct; others create a double-bind by incorporating a dubious presupposition; still others arbitrarily restrict the range of one's inquiries. All of this is inimical to open-mindedness. Engaging with a question in an open-minded way involves considering the widest range of possible responses or solutions, and showing the kind of curiosity that puts the desire to find out before personal interest and convenience. Because good questions serve to open our minds, Russell remarks that philosophy is to be studied for the sake of the questions themselves; and Whitehead's comment that the "silly question" is often the first hint of a totally novel development is especially relevant in the context of open-minded teaching.

Relativism: Because it is often associated with a respectful and tolerant attitude towards cultural differences concerning what is morally right and wrong, and also with a sensitive appreciation of pluralism with respect to methods, theories, perspectives, and interpretations in inquiry, relativism at first glance seems not only compatible with open-mindedness but quite central to it. If, however, relativism means that every moral view is equally worthy, or that all knowledge claims are equally true (since what is true is simply true for someone or some group), then the ideal of open-minded inquiry must vanish. If no view is conceivably better than another, why consider alternative views at all?

Surprise: A readiness for surprise is Robert Alter's way of capturing a vital aspect of open-mindedness. It means not being so locked into a particular way of thinking that one fails to appreciate or even notice some new and surprising possibility. It means being ready to welcome an unexpected, perhaps astonishing, development or interpretation; it means being prepared to recognize that a counter-intuitive idea happens to be true. Open-minded teachers are not only ready, but happy, to be surprised by their students, recognizing along with Dewey that not even the most experienced teacher can always anticipate the ways in which things will strike their students.

Tolerance: Not always considered to be a very worthy stance, partly because it seems to suggest grudgingly putting up with something rather than showing appropriate respect; and partly because it is clear that there is much that we should not tolerate.

Nevertheless, reasonable tolerance is important since it is often desirable to allow or permit that which we might prefer not to happen. One problem with zero tolerance policies is simply that strict liability prevents the exercise of open-minded decision-making in particular cases. Tolerance does not imply open-mindedness since one might never give serious consideration to that which one tolerates; but tolerance in society creates exposure to a wide range of beliefs and practices that may prove to be a stimulus to open-minded inquiry.

Uncertainty: Deeply controversial issues, disagreement among experts, insufficient and conflicting information, lack of confidence in institutions once admired, and newly emerging problems and crises, all underline Dewey's point that the world we live in is not settled and finished. The absence of certainty requires a tolerance for ambiguity — an ability and willingness to think critically and weigh alternatives in situations where decisions are problematic — and in these circumstances open-mindedness in teaching has the great value of stressing the provisional and tentative nature of conclusions, while at the same time committing us to the best use of whatever evidence and argument we can muster.

Veracity: The virtue of truthfulness entails a commitment to basing our views on an honest assessment of the evidence, and adjusting the degree of conviction we have in terms of the weight of such evidence. In Peirce's words, it involves a diligent inquiry into truth for truth's sake, with no axe to grind, and a passion to learn. It thrives on an open-minded willingness to take into account all that is relevant to drawing a true conclusion, but is defeated by ulterior motives, wishful thinking, hasty judgment, resistance to ideas, and a priori conviction.

Wonder: Suggests insatiable curiosity, endless questioning, imaginative speculation, openness to new experiences, and the sense that we will never quite exhaust our understanding and appreciation. Cursed be the dullard who destroys wonder, says Whitehead, but puzzlement and a fascination with ideas are all too often crushed by an over-emphasis on precision and detail. A person who is puzzled and wondering, says Aristotle, thinks himself or herself ignorant, and a keen awareness of one's own lack of knowledge is often a spur to an open-minded exploration of possibilities.

Xenophobia: A deep-seated fear or hatred of other cultures or races, with the result that prejudice, ignorance, contempt, and a feeling of superiority prevent people from noticing and appreciating what is of value in a different way of life or from considering what they might learn from other traditions. The open-minded person, by contrast, recognizes enormous value in pluralism and diversity, and sees such exposure as potentially enriching rather than threatening. The challenge for the open-minded teacher is to break down barriers created by bigotry and narrow provincialism.

You are obstinate, he is pigheaded: The speaker, needless to say, merely has firm opinions. This is Russell's memorable way of making the point that it is enormously difficult to recognize one's own tendencies towards closed-mindedness. We see ourselves as eminently reasonable, and our views as open to discussion, even though it

may be perfectly clear to others that we are only going through the motions of giving a serious hearing to a rival view. Russell labels this "good form", rather than genuine open-mindedness.

Zealotry: Enthusiasm, passion, and commitment are powerful qualities that come through very clearly in the teacher's manner, and students find themselves caught up in the same excitement. Hume reminds us, however, that no quality is absolutely blamable or praiseworthy, and commendable zeal can soon pass over into undesirable zealotry. The zealot has a fanatical commitment so unquestionably important that it outweighs the fundamental commitment to the promotion of independence and autonomy in students. In the context of education, zealotry translates into propaganda and indoctrination. Christopher Hitchens offers sound advice when he suggests that we "learn to recognize and avoid the symptoms of the zealot and the person who knows that he is right."

Concluding Comment

No general conclusion is really necessary. The selection is itself the conclusion, showing as it does a network of ideas crisscrossing and doubling back, sometimes taking unexpected twists and turns. To appreciate any particular part of the terrain involves exploring the links with other areas and seeing each from a variety of vantage points, so that one gradually comes to a sense of the whole. The attitude of open-mindedness is in danger of being lost sight of in education if we think of information and skills as our primary goals, or if as teachers we allow our expertise and authority to shut down our students' ideas. A map which reveals the richness and texture of the ideal of open-minded inquiry may serve to remind us of its fundamental value.

Dewey's comment on our ruling prepossessions comes from his essay "Why study philosophy?", *John Dewey: The Early Works* Vol. 4: 62-65; his remarks about an unsettled world are in *Democracy and Education*, ch. 11; the phrase, "the crutch of dogma", is from *Democracy and Education*, ch. 25; his reflections on the unanticipated aspects of teaching are in *Democracy and Education*, ch. 22; his views about the insights and wisdom of the teacher can be found in *Experience and Education* ch. 4; and his observation on "collateral learning" is in ch. 3 of the same book. Russell's concept of critical receptiveness appears in his *Sceptical Essays*, ch.12; his views on expertise appear in ch. 1 of the same book; the distinction between education and propaganda is found in his book *Power*, ch. 18; his remark on the value of philosophy is from *The Problems of Philosophy*, ch. 15; the comment on "good form" is from *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, ch. 5; the "irregular verb" ("I am firm, you are obstinate, he is a fool") was introduced by Russell in a BBC Brains Trust program, 26 April, 1948. Whitehead's comment on the "silly question" is found in Lucien Price, *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead*, ch. 22; his remark about destroying wonder is from *The Aims of Education*, ch. 3. Aristotle's comment on wonder is from his *Metaphysics* Book 1, ch. 2. Sagan's views about openness and skepticism are in "Wonder and skepticism", *The Sceptical Inquirer*, 1995. R. M. Hare's views on indoctrination are found in "Adolescents into adults", reprinted in Hare's *Essays on*

Religion and Education, 1992. Gould's comment on provisional consent comes from "Evolution as fact and theory", *Discover*, 1981. Alter's remark about surprise is from "A readiness to be surprised", *Times Literary Supplement*, January 23, 1998. Peirce's reference to a diligent inquiry into truth is from Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (eds.), *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* Vol. 1, #44. Hitchens' comment on the zealot is from his *Letters to a Young Contrarian*, 2001. La Rochefoucauld's remark on judgment is from the *Maxims* No. 89.

Further Reading

Hare, William. (2004). Assessing one's own open-mindedness. *Philosophy Now* 47, 26-28.

Hare, William. (2003). Guest Editor. Special issue on Open-mindedness and Education. *Journal of Thought* 23, 3.

Hare, William. (2003). Is it good to be open-minded? *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 17, 1: 73-87.

Hare, William. (2002). Teaching and the attitude of open-mindedness. *Journal of Educational Administration and Foundations* 16, 2: 103-24.

Hare, William. (2001). Bertrand Russell and the ideal of critical receptiveness. *Skeptical Inquirer* 25, 3: 40-44.

This article was first published as "Open-minded inquiry: A glossary of key concepts," in Inquiry: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines 23, 3, 2004: 37-41.

William Hare is Professor of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3M 2J6. Email: william.hare@msvu.ca