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Accountability and the Contemporary Intellectual

Greg Dimitriadis & Marc Lamont Hill

In his magisterial *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963) Richard Hofstadter marked a powerful distinction between intelligence and intellect. While intelligence is highly specific, delimited and connected to narrow or limited goals, intellect is open, creative, and less bound to particular domains. "Whereas intelligence seeks to grasp, manipulate, re-order, adjust, intellect examines, ponders, wonders, theorizes, criticizes, imagines" (p. 25). For Hofstadter, the increased focus on "intelligence" was linked to the "rise of the expert"—the collective fetishizing of technical expertise so much a part of anti-intellectualism in American life. In the realm of education, teacher accountability and school reform movements reflect these twinned tendencies—the valorization of specific kinds of technical expertise and a more general distrust of the intellectual and intellectual life. These tendencies are evident across the academic spectrum—from elementary through higher education. They bear down upon those of us in tertiary and non-tertiary education alike. They demand responses from us all.

Accountability and reform efforts in the US and around the world have been linked to a particular kind of evidence-based research. This research relies largely on the use of large-scale, randomized control trials. The goal of this research is to find the most seemingly "effective" pedagogical strategies, which can then be applied by teachers in the classroom. Teachers can then be judged, measured, and evaluated by their results, which are typically determined through student performance on standardized high stakes tests.

Presumably, if teachers simply did "what works," students would learn (and test) more effectively. The ultimate goal of evidence-based research and reform is the goal of many such technical exercises—the eradication of individual judgment and, ultimately, the individual. The goal of these deskilling processes is to banish teachers as intellectuals, to replace their individual and context-driven forms of intellectual production with "proven techniques" that can presumably be applied by a rotating set of functionaries.

It is impossible to understand these tendencies without understanding the deep, anti-intellectual tendencies at the heart of the contemporary American psyche. While pervasive in the 1960s, Hofstadter noted that anti-intellectualism "can rarely be called dominant" and that "the most malign forms are found mainly among small if vociferous minority groups" (p. 20). What was emergent in Hofstadter's time has become dominant in our own. Anti-intellectualism today is no longer confined to small circles. It has run rampant. Gathering, manipulating, and reordering information has come to replace thinking as the dominant mode of intellectual activity.

Indeed, the practice of thinking is often distrusted as (at best) impractical or (at worst) elitist. These tendencies are reflected in the field of education writ large—from K-12 classrooms where teachers are routinely subjected to reform efforts that rob them of their autonomy, to university hallways where

faculty are operating under audit logics that privilege narrow, technical competence in specific areas over broader kinds of intellectual engagement.

All of this points to a central project—rethinking the nature of intellectual work today for all of us in education. This project is aided by Edward Said, who drew a powerful and useful set of distinctions in his Representations of the Intellectual. Here, he separated the work of the intellectual into three roles and responsibilities. First, the intellectual is responsible to his or her discipline. That is, he or she is responsible to the accumulated knowledge in his or her specialty. This means both understanding that history, contributing to it, and passing it down to students.

Second, the intellectual is responsible to the broader social context in which he or she works. That is, he or she is responsible for responding to larger social and political issues. For Said, this was sharply underscored in his public intellectual work on the plight of Palestine, for which he was a tireless advocate.

Third, the intellectual is responsible to the larger (and limitless) body of knowledge outside of his or her specialty. That is, he or she should proudly remain in part an "amateur." This means avoiding narrow specialization and maintaining a love for intellectual exploration across multiple domains.

Said gives us another way to think about our "accountability" that stretches beyond the narrow, scientific notions currently in vogue. This alternative vision does not signal a turn away from our responsibility to students. Rather, it means widening the scope of such accountability to give educators a more expansive vision of what it means to do intellectual work today. In addition to our specialized knowledge, we are responsible for responding to larger social and political issues as we resist the lure of narrow "expertise" and its closures.

The latter was a central concern for Said as it was for Hofstadter, as intellectuals can easily become "experts" in service only to narrow power elites, whether on the Left or Right. Hofstadter wrote, "An acute and paradoxical problem of intellect as a force in modern society stems from the fact that it cannot lightly reconcile itself to either its associations with power or to its exclusion from an important political role" (p. 229). Negotiating these tensions is difficult and forces several challenges upon educational workers. Ultimately, these tensions demand an engagement with transgressive intellectual work that is informed by a pragmatic assessment of the current intellectual, political, and cultural landscape.

Such a project requires us to deploy modes and methods of resistance and transformation within increasingly anti-intellectual educational spaces. We must stretch (and, at times, blur) the epistemological boundaries of our respective fields and disciplines, thereby allowing new possibilities for locating, measuring, and validating knowledge claims. We must articulate a vision of accountability that underscores both the intrinsic and practical value of individual judgment and action. We must also expand our vocabulary of reform by separating "standards" from "standardization," "practice" from

"procedure," and "science" from "scientism." This has implications for us all—again, from elementary through higher education.

At the same time, we cannot ignore the importance of attending to the technocratic demands of the current moment, as they allow us to sustain our presence within the dominant spaces of knowledge production. This need is particularly significant now, as opposed to the early and middle part of the 20th century, because most intellectuals operate within the very institutions that they aim to challenge and change. Consequently, as we confront the limitations of "disciplinary decadence" (Gordon, 2007), we must consider institutional and disciplinary demands for tenure and promotion.

At the same time that we challenge the use of randomized control trials and high stakes testing, we cannot ignore the material impact of such measures within the punitive No Child Left Behind policy environment and its legacies. We must acknowledge the paradoxical condition of needing to deploy the vocabulary of power in order to challenge its fundamental legitimacy within particular spaces.

In essence, we must locate ways (both literally and intellectually) of being in institutions but not of them. As Said argues, such a position forces us into a posture of self-imposed marginality, a position from which we can challenge the dominant logic of the day and engage in new (or renewed) forms of knowledge production and concrete resistance. In doing so, we allow for the possibility of effecting a shift away from stifling conceptions of "intelligence" and back to richer, more ennobling, and more humanizing notions of "intellect."

References

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