Educational Reform, Modernity, and Pragmatism

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Modern times! This phrase has been used for satire, irony, metaphor, and, often, has been spoken in frustration. Many people who admire and follow film might quickly associate it with Charlie Chaplin’s movie *Modern Times*. Here is how Mick Martin and Marsha Porter (1994) described the film.

Charlie Chaplin must have had a crystal ball when he created *Modern Times*. [It was filmed in 1936.] His satire of life in an industrial society has more relevance today than when it was made. . . . The story finds the Little Tramp confronting all the dehumanizing inventions of a futuristic manufacturing plant. (p. 335)

The film caricatures the times in which we live by focusing on themes of regimentation, repetition, control, rationalization, and hectic pace that resonate with some of our experiences some of the time, if not most of our experiences most of the time. It is arguable that the seemingly continuous efforts toward educational reform during the last half of the century exhibit some of the themes in Chaplin’s film as many of the efforts that have been promoted were in the direction of increasing control, rationalization, and regimentation. An exploration of the relationship between reform, modernity (what it means to be modern), and pragmatism is the task that I have set for myself in this chapter. I begin with the words reform and modern.

The word reform has several meanings. The lexicographers who compiled *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* define reform as a noun as

The removal of faults or errors, esp. of a moral, political or social kind; amendment, change for the better; reformation of character, and

A particular instance of this; an improvement made or suggested; a change for the better.

As a verb reform has the following definitions

Restore or re-establish,
convert, bring back, or restore to the original form or a previous condition,
Cause to abandon wrongdoing,
thoroughly improve one’s conduct, and

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Redress (a wrong, loss, etc.), make good.

It is obvious that reform is a variation on re-form which is characterized as “form a second time, form over again or differently.” The word reform points in two directions. In one sense reform looks backward and seeks to recapture something lost that requires restoration. In another sense reform looks forward to successful reestablishment and redress. In the first sense reform seeks to put back into place something that has been corrupted and lost. In the second sense reform anticipates a revived but changed state of affairs, necessarily so because of changed conditions and context if nothing else. But what can such an educational reestablishment and restoration mean in a modern world? What could such looking backward and planning forward involve?

A second operative word in the title is modern. Modern and its derivatives such as modernity, modernism, and modernization have been appropriated in many discourses and practices that include but extend well beyond education. Returning to The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary modern refers

   to the present and recent times, as opp. to the remote past,
   characteristic of the present and recent times, and
   up-to-date in lifestyle, outlook, opinions, etc.; liberal-minded.

In these uses modern means what is going on now, what is latest, what is contemporary.

For a second reading of the meaning of modern I turn to Isaiah Berlin (1990). The term modern has been used to name the historical period in which we live that began, roughly speaking, in the 17th and 18th centuries and is coterminous with the European Enlightenment. I take the liberty of quoting at length Berlin’s description of the beliefs that characterized Enlightenment thinkers, whose thought is inextricably caught up in what is called the modern age.

They [Enlightenment thinkers] believed in varying measure that men were, by nature, rational and sociable; or at least understood their own and other’s best interests when they were not being bamboozled by knaves or misled by fools; that, if only they were taught to see them, they would follow the rules of conduct discoverable by the use of ordinary human understanding; that there existed laws which govern nature, both animate and inanimate, and that these laws, whether empirically discoverable or not, were equally evident whether one looked within oneself or at the world outside. They believed that the discovery of such laws, and knowledge of them, if it were spread widely enough, would of itself tend to promote a stable harmony both between individuals and associations, and within the individual himself. . . . They believed that all good and desirable things were necessarily compatible, and some maintained more than this—that all true values were interconnected by a network of indestructible, logically interlocking relationships. The more empirically minded among them were sure that a science of human nature could be developed no less than a science of inanimate things,