Both Educating and Being Educated Are Changing in the Twenty-First Century

To meet the demands of a society and workplace in flux, an educated person in the twenty-first century, over the course of his schooling, will need to develop a set of capabilities and competencies that have not previously been demanded of educated people—such as adaptability, confidence in the face of profound economic and psychic uncertainty, and the proclivity to keep mastering new subject matters and technologies over the course of a lifetime. Various members in the Gordon Commission have attempted to advance concepts that account for both the kind of character and “toolkit” that would signify a person as educated in the twenty-first century. In this chapter, we will discuss both Carl Bereiter and Marlene Scardamalia’s (2012) concept of “knowledgeability” as well as my own idea of “intellective competence.” As I contemplate the common thread between these two concepts—and really, the essence of what we are getting at when we attempt to define “educated”—I keep returning to the idea of human agency. Perhaps what we are saying is that a person with agency is able to become intellectively competent. So, what exactly do we mean by agency?

In a paper I wrote with Ana Mari Cauce (2012) for the Gordon Commission, we observed that we routinely use terms like overachiever and underachiever, or more colloquially and judgmentally we describe some people as lazy or unmotivated and others as can-do or can-make-it-happen. The saying that if you need something
done, ask a busy person, likewise comes to mind. In all these cases we seem to be referring to the fact that intelligence, talent, or high capability alone is not enough to lead to accomplishment or success, whether related to academic realms of accomplishment or otherwise. Even a combination of raw talent and an enabling environment does not always translate into accomplishment. Or as Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen has noted, a person “could have a great deal of freedom, without achieving much” (1987, p. 1). In contrast, there are those who achieve greatness in the face of tremendous obstacles or those who are able to drive their more limited talent toward great accomplishment. What makes for the difference between these types of persons has not been well defined or well measured but the construct that seems closest to capturing it is “human agency” and, of course, the disposition to use it. Or, as our more quantitatively oriented colleagues have described human agency, it is the “unexplained variance” once all other personality and environmental factors are accounted for (Hitlin and Elder, 2007, p. 33).

While it is difficult to find much writing or even reference to human agency outside of philosophy prior to the 1980s, there has been a growing interest in the construct both in the psychological and sociological literatures, especially in the works of Albert Bandura (1997, 2001, 2002, 2006) and Glen Elder (Elder, 1994; Hitlin and Elder, 2007). Human agency also figures prominently in the economic and political development literatures, where it fits into a “capabilities” framework, most clearly elaborated in the works of Sen (1985, 1987, 1999) and Sabine Alkire (2002, 2005, 2008). In addition, a very similar notion, that of individual empowerment, has received growing attention especially in the realms of women’s rights, healthcare, and workplace/organizational literature (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993; Nussbaum, 2000).

Cauce and I approach the construct of agency in an integrative fashion that fully acknowledges that while the disposition to act in an agentic manner may be, at least in part, a characteristic of the individual, there are contexts that are more or less likely to encourage human agency and/or to provide necessary preconditions for its expression.