Courage and Compassion in the Striving for Authenticity: States of Complacency, Compliance and Contestation

Carolin Kreber
University of Edinburgh

Abstract: Synthesising Martha Nussbaum’s study of the emotions and the capabilities approach to human development with Charles Taylor’s claim that (authentic) identities ought to be constructed dialogically against horizons of significance, the author identifies critical features of authenticity that are then applied to the context of adult educators, learners and pedagogies. With the purpose of surfacing the context-transcendent structure of authenticity, the article employs the metaphor of ‘coming out’ to refer to the process of striving for authenticity across different contexts. This striving involves overcoming complacency and compliance and engaging in contestation, has both a psychological and sociological dimension, and is associated with the civic virtues of courage and compassion. The author also speculates on why authenticity is perceived as a timely notion by many adult and higher education professionals.

Authenticity: Both a recurring and yet particularly timely theme?
The classic notion of ‘authenticity’, with its implicit contrast between authentic and inauthentic existence, remains an intriguing and intuitively compelling idea.

Over the past few years the notion of authenticity has also entered the disciplinary discourse of academics in the field of education. A great number of British and North American academics in adult and higher education as well as organizational and school leadership have identified authenticity as a significant concept in what it means to engage in higher or more worthwhile forms of teaching, learning and leading (Krebet et al., 2007, Kreber, in press). This evolving interest in authenticity among educational theorists and practitioners, as expressed by an upsurge of publications on this theme, invites some difficult yet intriguing questions: Why do adult and higher education professionals feel a need to draw our attention to authenticity these days? What is so compelling about this notion? Are we, to lean on Eagleton (2007), particularly driven, possibly for good historical reasons, to ponder the meaning in our teaching or learning practices more urgently now than we once were? Might authenticity offer a solution or meaningful response to what we perceive as the most significant challenges facing us at present in the field of adult and higher education? If so, can authenticity be attained by searching exclusively internally, that is within ourselves, or does it require looking also beyond the self - and if this were true, where else might we look?

Purpose
One purpose of this conceptual study is to speculate on some of the broader contextual/political factors that might account for this increased interest in authenticity among adult and higher education professionals My related second purpose is to explore whether authenticity is indeed an ideal that professional educators, learners and educational institutions (via their pedagogies) should seek to strive towards and to reflect on what this striving might entail. My goal is to enquire into the struggle that might underlie the process of becoming authentic in adult and higher education in the midst of factors that make such striving difficult. My overall purpose is to explore how the evocative notion of authenticity might contribute to the advancement of
theory and practice in adult and higher education. I suggest that exploring the purpose that authenticity is seen to serve in wider society (e.g., Eagleton, 2007; Guignon, 2004; Taylor, 1991) contributes to developing a richer conceptual understanding of authenticity in relation to adult and higher education. This goal is achieved more fully in an unabbreviated version of this conference paper (Kreber, press).

Some Theoretical Considerations

Complacency, compliance and contestation

The study highlights the transcendent themes of complacency, compliance and contestation. Becoming authentic is described as an on-going struggle that involves avoiding complacency (not challenging oneself) and compliance (not challenging others including norms and expectations) and engaging in contestation and public deliberation (challenging oneself and others, including norms and expectations). In other words, authenticity is fought over by pushing oneself to contest dominant agendas.

Authentic identities are dialogically constructed

From Taylor (1991) we get three insights. Firstly, the formal recognition (in its ‘strong’ sense) of identities is tied to socially constructed horizons of significance (which present the whole of our socially constructed traditions and cultural views). Specifically, Taylor (1991) argues that authenticity is not the same as creative self-definition (which nowadays it is often construed as). Whilst an exclusively subjectively constructed identity is based on what I deem to be significant (to myself), what is truly significant, Taylor suggests, I alone do not determine. Authentic identities need to be constructed around larger horizons of significance that transcend my own subjectivity. Secondly, Taylor suggests that identities, therefore, need to be constructed dialogically (rather than by looking only inwardly). Thirdly, he suggests that political participation and public deliberation of issues of importance to society is critical to a democracy. Implicit in Taylor’s argument is the view that ignoring larger horizons of significance is being complacent.

Becoming authentic as ‘coming out’

The work of Taylor (1991) and Guignon (2004) suggests that by taking a stand on who one is, or on what one believes in (on any relevant issue and/or aspect of identity), and doing so in public, one avoids both complacency and compliance but engages in contestation and debate, which is an important aspect of moving towards greater authenticity. Clearly, ‘coming out’ about one’s own difference (about one’s assumptions, values, beliefs, etc.), thus construed, does not mean that one will always encounter confirmation of one’s own deeply held stance; the opposite might be the case. The important point though is that through public debate one will be encouraged to take a critical stance towards one’s own views and might occasionally even change them. Gaining in authenticity, therefore, is not the same as being confirmed for one’s views. In terms of ‘recognition’, one might want to say that we recognize one another when we listen to one another’s views. This I would say is the ‘weaker’ (though no less important) meaning of recognition. The ‘stronger’ form of recognition, as in the recognition of same sex marriage, actually depends on the weaker form. By ‘coming out’, that is by engaging in contestation and debate, one becomes part of a larger process that is aimed at preserving and allowing for a life that makes possible authenticity as a moral ideal, one that a society can choose to guide itself by (Taylor, 1991). ‘Coming out’ publicly is as essential for authenticity as
the more internal process of freeing oneself from the ‘they’ (Heidegger), separating from the herd (Nietzsche), or being ‘disencumbered’ by dominant voices (Barnett); both processes matter.

**Courage and compassion**

Numerous examples, across a wide range of contexts, could be featured to illustrate constraints on ‘coming out’ about one’s views or difference (see Kreber, in press). The important point though is that there are many situations where what is needed in the strive for authenticity may not just be the courage to publicly assert one’s own claims to recognition (that is to ‘come out’ publicly), but instead the care and courage of compassionate others who, by helping to assert the claims of minorities to recognition, provide assistance in effecting change.

Nussbaum (2004) defines the emotion of compassion as three interrelated judgements we make: a belief that “the misfortunes of others are serious, and that they have not brought this misfortune on to themselves, and, in addition, that they are themselves important parts of one’s own scheme of ends and goals” (p.335). This implies that we see others as important to our own flourishing, that is to the fulfilment of our typically human faculties (Nussbaum, 2000; 2004). Likewise Eagleton (2007) argued that human flourishing is ultimately reciprocal; we work towards our own flourishing by helping others with their flourishing.

**Authenticity and the capabilities approach**

The notion of human flourishing is based on Aristotelian philosophy, where it is seen as a condition for well-being or “happiness”. Aristotle believed that it is through striving for ‘excellence’ through reasoning about what to do and how to act in the particular contexts or situations we find ourselves in, that we attain virtuous dispositions that make us ‘good’ (moral) (Thomson, 1976). Now, three observations may be made at this point. Firstly, one might argue that developing the capacity for compassion (which, as Nussbaum’s [2004] analysis demonstrated, comes about through contemplation [or making reasoned judgements]) makes us more ‘authentically human’ (as it is an emotion –based on reasoned judgements- only humans can experience and cultivate) and thereby offers us a more meaningful or “happy” life. Secondly, it is through this human capacity for compassion that we can recognize the suffering of others whose opportunities to live authentically might be circumscribed. By looking out for one another on the basis of compassion we also support each others’ authenticity. Third, in order to be “happy”, people need to be given space for their human faculties to flourish. The capacity to experience compassion, is one of several capabilities that Nussbaum’s (2000) identifies as being fundamental for human flourishing. Importantly, compassion is fundamental to our own flourishing and the flourishing of others.

Sen and Nussbaum’s (1993) capabilities approach to human development is based on the view that real quality of life can be determined only by looking at the extent to which each and every individual in a country is capable of flourishing. In Nussbaum’s (2000) words, the capabilities approach looks at “what individuals are actually able to do or be” (p.69). Importantly, Sen and Nussbaum argue that societies need to consider the “happiness” of its people (or perhaps ‘authenticity’) a significant measure of quality of life and commit to nurturing the capabilities that support human flourishing.

Nussbaum (2000) proposed a tentative list of ten basic interlocking categories of central human functional capabilities as being essential for healthy and just human living and development, by which all countries should be held accountable. The categories of capabilities relate, for example, to being able to make the very most of one’s imagination and thought.
through adequate education; having the social bases for self-respect (i.e., being protected against discrimination on the bases of race, sex, etc), being able to live with and towards others; being able to imagine the situation of someone else and experiencing compassion, and, by extension, having the capacity for both justice and friendship.

So what I would like to conclude here, in a synthesis of Nussbaum’s and Taylor’s respective analyses, is that the right to ‘happiness’, the right to living a fulfilling live, or ‘human flourishing’, should or could be a ‘horizon of significance’ (Taylor, 1991) against which to recognize each other (in its weaker sense) and to organize social services including education (see also Walker, 2006). Moreover, I suggest that living authentically involves, next to living a ‘happy’, meaningful and fulfilled life, a willingness to ‘come out’ to oneself and others and thereby an openness to engage in public deliberation and contestation. This involves both courage and compassion. Authenticity, therefore, is linked to identifying what one believes in (which at times also means to confront the truth about oneself) and making one’s own sincerely held views (or difference) explicit, thereby engaging, through dialogue, with the views and values of others. Engagement in such dialogue involves courage; but it also involves compassion to hear the views of others and help them assert their claims to recognition. These ideas, I suggest, have profound implications for teaching and learning in adult and higher education.

The capabilities approach to higher education pedagogies

Inspired by Sen and Nussbaum’s capabilities approach to human development, Walker (2006) recently asked “If higher education ought to enable human flourishing, we need to ask how in and through higher education do we support rather than hinder human flourishing?” (p.18). Following Nussbaum’s (2000) lead, Walker (2006) offers a list of several capabilities (understood as opportunities for human functioning based on the ultimate goals of equality and justice in and through education) that higher education ought to foster. The list itself, which includes many of Nussbaum’s original suggestions for human and women’s development (such as practical reason, knowledge and imagination, respect dignity and recognition, emotional integrity, etc), is suggested for debate and ideally, Walker suggests, is arrived at through public deliberation.

The link to authenticity I wish to highlight here is two-tiered. Firstly, the capabilities approach to higher education pedagogies as proposed by Walker could itself be considered a horizon of significance (Taylor, 1991) by which we judge what counts as a genuine higher (and adult) education. Not everything should be recognized and public deliberation about which capabilities are worth pursuing in and through adult and higher education, and why, is critically important. Secondly, the learning outcomes the capabilities approach in education is concerned with are all about human development, about the freedom to make informed choices for oneself, about ‘human flourishing’. Another way of putting this is to say that the capabilities approach is about assisting people to live authentic lives. It is also ultimately about the common good as it is about equal distribution of capabilities among learners and supporting the flourishing of one another.

What might be so compelling about authenticity?

Nussbaum (2000) argued that “to be able to search for an understanding of the ultimate meaning of one’s life in one’s own way is among the most important aspects of a life that is truly human” (p. 179). Extrapolating from the work of Nussbaum (2000, 2004) and Taylor (1991), I suggest
that the reason adult educators are drawn to the notion of authenticity might be our human need for recognition and having our voices heard at a time when we experience heightened alienation from our own sense of what it means to be an ‘educator’ and to offer a good education. Specifically I ask: Might there be a shared sense that aspects of our professional lives have become increasingly separated from this core characteristic of what it means to be truly human? and Might the felt alienation from a deep sense of what it is to be an educator constitute the underlying motivation for the present interest (perhaps even yearning) for authenticity?

Nixon (2007) argued that they work under “conditions … which are often deeply alienating and inauthentic” (p.22). Below I feature in point form some plausible contextual factors that might contribute to this felt sense of alienation and inauthenticity among educators: a climate of audit, accountability and performativity that encourages compliance with policies that reflect directions for adult and higher education we may not agree with (for example neoliberal agendas informed by human capital theory or the expectation to predetermine specific learning outcomes at all levels).

• a concern over the strength of the nation’s economy and competitiveness in a global market (this concern manifests itself in the employability agenda, vocationalized curricula and competition over alternative income streams. Even so-called internationalization efforts are largely motivated by economic imperatives although they could afford opportunities to link postsecondary institutions more closely with the needs of our global society (e.g., Kreber, 2009).

• the commercialization of higher education (i.e., efforts aimed at making a profit from teaching, research, and other campus activities). Although certainly not a new phenomenon, Bok (2003) emphasized the unprecedented size and scope of commercial practices that can be witnessed today. We can observe this also in growing efforts geared towards modularization, reflecting an understanding of knowledge as a commodity that can be packaged and sold.

• increased competition among colleagues (for research funding, awards, release time, graduate students, …) encouraging a view that human flourishing is an individual and isolated affair independent of mutual relations with others. Others are considered a potential threat to one’s success or flourishing. This is, as we have seen, in contrast to our human nature necessary for survival (Eagleton, 2007) where “the fulfilment of each becomes the ground for the fulfilment of the other” (p.97).

• professional development programs for educators that emphasize technique and/or purely psychological issues of learning at the expense of encouraging reflection and engagement with the larger purposes of adult and higher education, thereby encouraging ‘surface learning’ about teaching. A more sophisticated sense of professionalism might ask deeper questions, not what one “is supposed to do” but “why one does it and who benefits from it” (Said, 1994, cited in Walker, 2006, p.138).

More generally, many observers feel a growing tension between higher education’s intellectual, critical, theoretical and moral purposes, and those that are more practical and economic in nature and oriented towards providing a service to society (e.g.,Walker, 2006). While both, to critique (or contest) and to serve (or comply) are important, there is a growing sense that the former is being lost as economic imperatives take over.

These larger contextual issues, one might argue, trickle down and make themselves felt in the particular contexts in which we work and our students learn. Constraints on choice regarding matters of curriculum (or research) and constraints on what is considered worthwhile knowledge to be shared can easily be seen as leading to alienation on the part of both educators
and learners. Being forced into situations where we cannot make decisions based on our best convictions is therefore a plausible factor promoting inauthenticity. This sense of inauthenticity, in turn, makes some of us yearn for greater authenticity. Such inauthenticity, therefore, is often a matter of compliance with external expectations, although over time, it can develop into complacency, whereby we do not even realize that we conform to external demands. Such a state might then perhaps more accurately be referred to as unauthenticity.

**Summary**
The study shows that the literature on authenticity reflects at least two major concerns, both of which, one might argue, are equally important. One concern relates to the importance of ‘coming out’ about one’s own views or ‘difference’. This involves overcoming both complacency and compliance and engaging in contestation. A second concern, which I argue is a plausible motivation for present interest in authenticity, is bound up directly with the notion of recognition, as well as courage and compassion. As several philosophers and educationalists remind us, authenticity is not simply a matter of asserting one’s own claims to recognition but also of supporting others in raising their claims to recognition. From an ethical point of view, authenticity (also within the context of education) has always been linked in some way to courage and compassion, to justice and the common good (see Starratt, 2004; Grimmet and Neufeld, 1994; Nixon, 2007; Walker, 2006; Guignon, 2004 or Taylor, 1991).

I explored the meaning of authenticity in general and tried to relate the concept to educators and pedagogies respectively. With regards to ‘authentic pedagogy’, I argue that the capabilities approach to education (Walker, 2006) might offer a horizon of significance (Taylor, 1991) for adult and higher education. Moreover, the capabilities themselves (understood as opportunities for human functioning) support human development, the freedom to make informed choices for oneself, and hence human flourishing. In other words, the capabilities approach is about supporting learners (and educators) in becoming authentic.

**References**


