THE SERA LECTURE 2006
HOW CAN COMMUNITIES CONNECT? NEGOTIATING
DIFFERENCE IN AN AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

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ABSTRACT

The theme of connecting communities in education prompts reflection on the very ideas of *community* and *connection*. A paradox of globalization is that as different communities have become more connected - globally and within nation states - many assert their specificity more strongly. So tendencies towards universalism are viewed more skeptically. This lecture has two aims. First, it calls for a reconsideration of the meaning of community and our reasons for valuing it. Secondly, it proposes a qualified universalism that recognizes the extent to which communities do indeed connect, with some implications for education.

INTRODUCTION: ON CONNECTION, LEARNING AND COMMUNITY

The theme of this year's SERA conference – *Connecting learning communities* – evokes a set of challenging issues that confront us as educators at this time, presented through the key ideas of community, learning and connection.

The idea of communities of learning can be traced to John Dewey's work (see Burbules, 2000: 324-325), though it has more recently been explored in the influential writings of Lave and Wenger (especially 1991), whose model of situated learning persuades us that learning – far from being something that individuals 'do' when they are taught – involves engagement in 'communities of practice' which can include schools, but is not confined to them. Participation in communities of practice binds their members together in forms of relationships and communal life that give them a sense of identity. The notion of connecting learning communities, additionally, evokes the connectivity that the Internet can deliver in education – to learning communities and between communities of learning, in a time of technology-driven transitions unleashed by and unleashing globalization. *Connection* suggests the potential for connectivity across great distances with distance no boundary - except for technological limitations on connectivity - to learning communities that are different from our own. And connectivity makes it possible for distant communities to learn from and about one another in ways that were less feasible until recently. It also makes possible the formation of new kinds of communities.

The themes of community and connection challenge us to respond to some pressing educational, social and political problems. On the one hand the new forms of community promised to us by globalization are extensive. The Internet enables people to form collaborative working groups that can create new working identities (Burbules, 2000: 335, 341) and new learning communities. It comprises a space with a potentially global character making "worldwide, nearly instantaneous communication and interaction possible" (Ibid: 348), bringing into close interaction various cultures and societies. The Internet itself might be considered a virtual or global community and as a medium the web offers new ways of constituting social and political communities, especially through its potential to foster global social movements and global civil society. However skeptical we might be about regulation of the manifestations of globalization as well as the possibility and indeed the desirability of global government, globalization can enhance democracy. While the sovereignty of national governments is diluted by the effects of globalization, as power shifts to multinational corporations, the Internet does create new spaces

for democracy to flourish, as a medium for deliberation, for transnational social movements and civil society, and for domestic and cross-border e-voting, e-referenda and e-petitions.

Educational institutions are not unaffected by the development of the Internet. Schools and universities are trying to accommodate themselves as learning communities to the forms of community and of learning offered by e-learning and the Internet.

> Education for life in a global world broadens the outlines of "community" beyond the family, the region, or the nation. Today the communities of potential affiliation are multiple, dislocated, provisional, and ever-changing…. [Now] educational aims that have more to do with flexibility and adaptability…, with learning how to coexist with others in diverse (and hence often conflict-ridden) public spaces, and with helping to form and support a sense of identity that can remain viable within multiple contexts of affiliation, all emerge as new imperatives. (Burbules, 2000: 21)

Under these conditions, what becomes of Dewey's vision of schools as communities closely integrated with the wider communities of which they comprise a part? Globalization has far-reaching implications for our understanding of community and of education. It also, paradoxically, drives us to seek refuge in local and traditional forms of community, whose future seems to many to be threatened by globalization, as we find ourselves drawn to both particularist and globalist ideas (Scheffler, 2001). Noting the conflict between the tendency towards global integration on the one hand and towards communal differentiation on the other, Samuel Scheffler observes the paradox that 'we recoil in horror from the bloody ethnic conflicts of which television has made us all spectators, but we celebrate diversity and difference and are suspicious of the idea of a common culture' (Ibid: 65).

I want to relate these tensions, at least as a starting point, to current worries in the United Kingdom about social cohesion and terrorism. The train bombings in July 2005 and the 2006 arrests for plotting to blow up trans-Atlantic planes have prompted bemusement and self-doubt in Britain about integration and cohesion. I've been warned not to appear to refer with enthusiasm to the sayings of politicians who speak from Westminster when in Scotland, so I am going to refer to a recent speech as neutrally as possible – not because I necessarily agree with the speaker's views or actions but because it opens up an issue that needs to be taken further. At the launch on 24 August 2006 of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion, Ruth Kelly, then Community and Local Government Secretary, observed that "global tensions are being reflected on the streets of local communities" (Guardian Unlimited, 2006). She sees integration as posing more apparent challenges with the passing of time, with second and third generation immigrants struggling "to reconcile their own values and beliefs with those of their parents and grandparents" and some white Britons feeling uncomfortable with the diversity of their neighborhoods. When published on the Guardian Unlimited website the speech was filed under 'Politics and terrorism', even though it refers only briefly to 9/11 and 7/7, which is revealing in itself. It is tragic that the debate on community and cohesion is so closely tied to the one on terrorism.

Kelly believes that it is time for a debate about British identity and that, after a period of consensus about multiculturalism, it is time to ask whether multiculturalism is now encouraging separateness. In arguing the importance of the establishment of the Commission she poses a question and a response:

> In our attempt to avoid imposing a single British identity and culture, have we ended up with some communities living in isolation of each other, with no common bonds between them?

> I think we face the clear possibility that we are experiencing diversity no longer as a country, but as a set of local communities…

Significantly, this reflection suggests that in spite of their location in one national state, these communities are failing to connect. As the speech moves on it is noticeable that Kelly uses 'community' in at least two senses; one alludes to communities of *difference*, but another is *geographical*, seeing community in localities, some of which are tackling problems of cohesion and integration by measures like school twinning, community charters of values, citizens' days (the latter two are local), and mentoring schemes. She also hints at a universalist stance in declaring that "Even within a framework of mutual tolerance, I believe that there are non-negotiable rules, understood by all groups, both new and established. We must be clear and unafraid to say that we expect these will be shared and followed by all who live here". For those of us with a specific interest in education, the kinds of questions raised by Kelly, who is not alone in doing so, must surely prompt some reflection on the wisdom of policies that encourage, for example, faith schools rather than the common school. My point here is less a standard objection to faith schools – that they are divisive – than an objection that they isolate communities from one another. Coming from South Africa, and a society struggling to undo the enduring effects of segregation (admittedly under rather different circumstances), the degree of social and educational segregation in the United Kingdom - and the kinds of mutual incomprehension associated with it - is striking.

For many of us, Kelly is saying the unthinkable, not by questioning particular conceptions of community and multiculturalism, but by flirting with universalism. In doing so she invites the ire of those who insist on the relativism often associated with postmodernism, 'in which universal propositions are *automatically* rejected as contravening some supposed law of ineluctable and irreconcilable cultural plurality' (Tomlinson, 2002: 244) . John Tomlinson quotes Terry Eagleton's (1996) scathing comment:

> Postmodern theory often operates with quite rigid binary oppositions, with 'difference', 'plurality' and allied terms lined up bravely on one side of the theoretical fence as unequivocally positive, and whatever their antitheses might be (unity, identity, totality, universality) ranged balefully on the other. Before battle has been joined, these more disreputable-looking conceptual warriors have usually been subtly got at – tampered with, disabled and travestied in some way, so that the victory of the angelic forces is well-nigh assured (Eagleton, quoted in Tomlinson, 2002: 244).

Perhaps Eagleton underestimates the virtues of postmodernism, but he makes an important point. How have we got to such a pass? Why is universalism one of the greatest sins of the politically incorrect, so likely to provoke howls of indignation? Is it because universalism has predominantly taken the oppressive shape evident in historical patterns of relations between hegemonic political and cultural forces that have imposed particular values and practices on others – through colonialism, neo-colonialism and the treatment of minorities – and sometimes majorities? If so, it is understandable that defenses of community and of multiculturalism have tried to counter such brands of universalist thought. But we should not allow the dead hand of political correctness to prevent us from considering other possible expressions of universalism.

The anti-universalist stance in education staunchly opposes what are regarded as the universal values through which groups that are traditionally privileged enforce their own prejudices and stereotypes. Ronald Beiner comments on this position:

> What we have here … is an ideological perspective that wants to see oppression, that wants to see hegemonic majorities trampling over excluded

minorities, and that as a matter of automatic reflex refuses to accept the notion that an appeal to universalistic conceptions could ever be anything other than a cover for particularistic hegemony… (Beiner, 2006: 33).

Beiner warns that there is a price to pay when one embraces this ideological position. And he quotes with approval the response to just this perspective made by Michael Walzer, a leading American communitarian philosopher: "Schools should teach universal values, front and center: the value of life, respect for other people, everyday kindness, democratic rights, and so on." (Shaughnessey & Sardoc, quoted in Beiner, 2006: 33)

In arguing that it is time for a reconsideration of universalism and also of the meaning and value of community, I suggest that what we have here is an example of how what starts out as an important theoretical insight – that universalism can express insular and hegemonic values as if they are neutral and to the benefit of all – can become congealed into orthodoxy and received opinion that prevents insight and ongoing open debate. As Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006) observes of the history of ideas, some terms are shape shifters that often duplicate the disease they purport to cure. He is referring to multiculturalism, which since the heyday of communitarian philosophy in the 1980s has become an influential expression of communitarian values.

My argument proceeds in the main by questioning some common assumptions. There are three complementary assumptions that I want to challenge in arguing for a different view on the value of community and how and why communities need to find ways to connect, including through education. The first assumption is that if we value community, the local, the particular, we can't simultaneously also embrace any form of universalism. I will align myself with Scheffler's (2001) argument that the universal can be integrated with commitments to the local in a principled way that makes room for particular interests and responsibilities. The second is the assumption that universalism is inescapably Eurocentric, in that it inevitably implies the hegemonic imposition of a 'European' perspective and so must denigrate all others.

The third strand in my argument is the claim that, prompted in part by the effects of globalization, we do need to reconsider the meaning of community and how to value it. And finally, I argue that if communities are to connect, which they need to do with some urgency, we ought to accommodate a universalist position in order to create conditions in which difference can be negotiated and some pressing problems addressed – and to educate in a way that prepares citizens for such negotiation.

Starting with the third strand of my argument I want to turn the discussion about learning communities in a different direction, taking in the problematic characteristics of community, as well as ways in which communities can connect and so learn. I take the optimistic view that communities can and do learn from and about each other, but also a skeptical stance on the widely held opinion that communities are distinct, separate, and always a social and educational good.

COMMUNITY RECONSIDERED

If we value community, which we seem to do, and we think communities should connect, what are the communities that need to be connected? These days, for those interested in education, the idea of communities of learning is derived from a well-known source in the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), who analyse learning in contexts of apprenticeship like tailoring, meat cutting and midwifery. But taking a wider view, we can ask: connecting which communities? The communities we belong to are all – one way or another - about learning. Certainly in modern liberal democracies and even in many more traditional societies we belong to a range of communities – in our neighbourhoods, workplaces (management literature has not

been slow in its uptake of the idea of the learning community), leisure activities, and our cultural, religious and political affiliations. As our membership of these communities progresses from early initiation into their practices and as membership is enacted through learning the practices that define those communities, through to participation in reproducing and refining them, we *learn*. When we talk about community we come face to face with a concept that marks much of our political as well as our educational discourse, in both of which community is widely seen as an unmitigated good. Without community (supposedly) we are lost, atomistic individuals adrift without connection.

But what do we do with the very idea of community in a globalised age, in which we may belong to multiple communities, including communities of choice? Very different communities now find themselves in close proximity, bound together in larger communities of fate, ultimately sharing responsibility for ensuring the earth's future as a viable environment. Global capital and its media seduce us all into consumption, not least the youth of all communities, who are promised fulfilled lives through the purchase of global brands.

Not all of the things that people learn in the array of affiliations at large in the world's communities are good things. Klansmen and child pornographers also form communities and try to induct new members by encouraging them to learn their practices. These are tendentious examples, it might be objected. Yet their dissonant implications do prompt recognition that we have acquired a tendency to revere *communities* regardless of their characteristics, as we are repeatedly exhorted to celebrate difference. Moving away from extreme examples, many feminists would want to point out that a defining feature common to all cultural communities is a central preoccupation with the control of women, of their bodies and their sexuality. Feminists are divided about what we do next, if we accept this claim. We are unable to tackle that controversy here but it does point to the need for caution before assuming communities are, necessarily and always, good things.

A different but not unrelated critical take on the ideal of community is developed by Iris Marion Young who writes that it:

> … expresses a desire for the fusion of subjects with one another which in practice operates to exclude those with whom the group does not identify. The ideal of community denies and represses social difference, the fact that the polity cannot be thought of as a unity in which all participants share a common experience and common values. In its privileging of face-to-face relations, moreover, the ideal of community denies difference in the form of the temporal and spatial distancing that characterizes social process (Young, 1990: 227).

Young draws attention to a feature of communities more recently highlighted by Osler and Starkey (2005). They describe communities as 'a major locus of identity' (Ibid: 80). But although communities have positive connotations and exist in various forms, they argue that 'in practice, the way people exercise power over others in communities means that the sense of security [associated with them] may be illusory. For instance, sexual abuse or harassment and forms of racism are found in all types of communities' (Ibid: 81). Instead of taking community as an uncontroversial good, Osler and Starkey prefer to emphasise that communities change and evolve, and they develop the idea of the citizen as a member of a 'community of communities' (Ibid: 82), not only as a nation state like Britain, but also as a member of a world community of communities.

Globalization means not only greater integration in communications and of economies. It also requires that decisions be made that include larger and more diverse groups of people, in which interaction is unavoidable. This interaction has already produced some global decisions that are universalist in nature, for example

on human rights and on women's rights as human rights. And globalization also gives us the means of connection with other communities. This context requires us to connect with other communities, and to teach our pupils and students to do so, in ways that do more than celebrate difference. Our connection with others requires that we find ways to negotiate around our differences. Defenders of universalism have started to formulate ways in which education can address this task.

UNIVERSALISM

Returning now to the influential assumptions that I have set out to question, I turn next to discuss the emerging literature that argues the case for us to reconsider universalism. It is a case that has been argued by several authors (e.g. Nussbaum, 2000; Gould, 2004), but I will start with a position advanced by Seyla Benhabib (2002), beginning with her explanation for the pervasiveness of the anti-universalist position, and then giving a brief account of her brand of universalism and the measures which she proposes will allow us to negotiate difference deliberatively while still accommodating plurality.

Benhabib observes that the kinds of identity politics that have developed around the world have increased the tensions between the universalistic principles introduced by the American and the French revolutions and particularities of ethnicity, religion, language, race and nationality (Ibid: vii). In contemporary political discourse issues of cultural identity are at the forefront.

> … I argue that the response to this "strange multiplicity" has been a premature normativism…an all-too-quick reification of given group identities, a failure to interrogate the meaning of cultural identity…[which] has resulted in hasty policy recommendations that run the risk of freezing existing group differences (Ibid: viii).

Benhabib challenges what she calls a 'reductionist sociology of culture' (Ibid: 4), which assumes 'faulty epistemic premises: (1) that cultures are clearly delineated wholes; (2) that cultures are congruent with population groups and that a noncontroversial description of the culture of a human group is possible…'. She argues (Ibid: 7-8) that the strong or mosaic multiculturalism which sees cultures as entities that can be clearly delineated, with clear boundaries like the pieces in a mosaic, is wrong - both empirically and normatively. Intercultural justice is not about preserving cultures, but about justice and freedom. In this vein, she favours redistributionist measures against 'processes of cultural corporate group formation' (Ibid: 80), pointing to the extent to which collective identities are bureaucratically and administratively controlled and manipulated. According to her brand of sociological constructivism cultures are crafted, recreated and negotiated, by contrast with mosaic multiculturalism which frequently tries to designate one 'master narrative' as predominant in constructing *personal* identities. In similar vein, Appiah (2005: 138) warns that cultural construction is often concealed by 'the carapace of cultural preservation'.

For Benhabib (2002) not only is strong incommensurability between cultures philosophically incoherent; seemingly irresolvable epistemological and political conflicts *can* be resolved through compromise. In advocating her particular brand of universalism, Benhabib defends what she calls a pluralistically enlightened ethical universalism, one that is interactive and deliberative, historically and politically enlightened. She also emphasises that this kind of universalism works within the sphere of legal and constitutional issues and need be neither Eurocentric nor ethnocentric. In making this latter claim Benhabib's universalism is supported by Appiah's *rooted cosmopolitanism* (2005, especially chapter 6). Appiah points out that within the European tradition, the principal dissenters from universalism during the Enlightenment developed theories of racial difference that were used to justify

slavery, colonialism and genocide. In a recent text, Appiah (2006) includes discussion of Islamic neofundamentalism as an expression of universalism. Universalism may take different forms – including toxic ones - but it is not defined by Eurocentrism.

Benhabib asks for the recognition of the hybridity and polyvocality that characterises all cultures. 'Politically, the right to cultural self-expression needs to be grounded upon, rather than considered an alternative to, universally recognised citizenship rights' (Ibid: 26). She continues:

> …I am suggesting that the democratisation of collective identities would require us to challenge the hidden logic of many of [the categories of collective classification accepted in the preservationist politics of cultural recognition]. The goal would be to move a democratic society toward a model of public life in which narratives of self-identification would be more determinant of one's status in public life than would designators and indices imposed on one by others (Ibid: 80).

Her deliberative model permits robust cultural contestation in the public sphere, but it is not irreconcilable with recognising, respecting and negotiating some forms of difference. The future of the democratic polity and the habits of mind appropriate to a democratic citizenry depends on a civil public space in which multicultural understanding is negotiated, which requires the cultivation of an 'enlarged mentality' allowing the exercise of 'civic imagination in which the standpoints of other(s) are taken into account to woo their agreement on… norms that affect our lives and interactions' (Ibid: 170-1). The enlarged mentality that Benhabib regards as a necessary condition for democratic citizenship presupposes the ability to negotiate between conflicting perspectives by considering one's own loyalties from a hypothetical universalistic standpoint. Her proposals for a democratic model that would accommodate an enlightened universalism include brief reference to education: 'I would suggest that under principles of discourse ethics, any educational system that denies the exposure of children to the most advanced form of knowledge and inquiry available to humankind is unjustifiable' (Ibid: 123).

Turning to institutional design, Benhabib locates her deliberative model within a dual-track approach, comprising on the one hand institutions already functioning within liberal democracies, such as their legislatures and judiciaries. On the other hand she designates the public sphere, comprising civil society groups, social movements and associations as where multicultural struggles and 'value transformations' (Ibid: 106) take place.

If this sounds too robust a brand of universalism, Appiah's 'rooted' or 'congenial' cosmopolitanism offers one that might be more palatable. He argues, to put it simply, 'that there are some values that are, and should be universal, just as there are lots of values that are, and must be, local' (2006: xxi), emphasizing that we live in a world that is crowded and in which it is no longer an option to hold that it comprises distinct communities that are hived off from each other. His cosmopolitanism rests on our shared human capacity to grasp stories. Appiah takes up the implications of his account of cosmopolitanism for education in a way that accommodates both preparing children for autonomy and for citizenship, and identity formation. The state has an important role to play; as children's identities develop the state needs to protect their autonomy against parents, churches and communities. But in the context of this lecture it is Appiah's model of *conversation*, especially with people from different ways of life, that is important. Attending to story telling in different cultures, evaluating stories together, is one of our central means of maintaining the social fabric.

The contrast between story telling, within and between different communities, and cultural contestation in the public sphere, as approaches to education in a world of growing connection between communities, indicates that there is a range of ways

in which a more universalist approach to difference can be taken up. This range can be fleshed out further with reference to the four stages that Marilyn Friedman (2004: 219) describes in encountering others' view-points, each of which can allow for openness to views newly encountered (a condition which crude anti-universalism is inclined to claim that universalists cannot meet). These stages are: becoming *acquainted* with viewpoints that are different from one's own; ensuring that one *understands* them; giving them 'genuine reflective *consideration*'; and *assessing* them with a view to their possible revision.

Of these four stages of encounter between different viewpoints, it is the last, assessing, that is the most likely to prompt tensions between communities, though even assessing need not be confrontational or involve one group's forcing its assessment on others. It is common when public figures try to encourage such assessing that the media, ever in search of a provocative headline, caricature and oversimplify their statements. The result is frequently a ritual of indignation and lack of connection. But exchanges between communities need not take this form. The alternatives, of acquaintance, understanding and consideration, should be taken up in learning communities like schools and universities, through their curricula but also through the informal conversations that people have when they spend time together.

My argument has addressed two kinds of connection. The first is *descriptive*: technology connects communities, collapsing spatial differences. Second, and relatedly, because globalization has brought communities into closer contact and interdependence, I have also set out to make a *normative* claim: that we need to understand the other communities that comprise an expanded global community – a community of communities. For these reasons we can no longer take the meaning of either community or connection for granted. Communities are now so multiple and proximate that connection can't be avoided. Acknowledging the descriptive claim creates the imperative that we appreciate the point of view of the other. Contrary to assumptions about universalism, a universalist approach to difference, in which we are obliged to democratically consider our viewpoints and those of others from a hypothetical universalistic perspective, offers a fruitful way to connect in negotiating difference.

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