Analytical Thinking in a Time of COVID (and Trump):
College Students, Elections, and Data Analysis

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Drawing on the wealth of literature regarding scaffolding, the author explores the use of data analysis under conditions of remote learning to help students think and talk about a divisive election, whilst building the skills necessary to not only undertake independent research, but to become creators of knowledge. The chapter explores the structures that can support students as they move from passive recipients of knowledge to producers of knowledge, as well as ways that the educational institution can support faculty members in the transition from exclusively face-to-face instruction to online learning. The combination of remote learning and data analysis, as a major learning goal, may contribute to a more analytical, hence less controversial or confrontational, learning environment.

INTRODUCTION

Among the most important public goods that virtually all states either provide or attempt to provide, healthcare and education rank highly. The SARS-COV2 virus profoundly threatened both on a global scale. Whilst in the healthcare arena, the World Healthcare Organization (WHO) and Centers for Disease Control (CDC) provide transnational and national guidance with respect to implementation of emergency measures. No such governing bodies exist in the field of education: no one stands at the ready to provide guidance, recommendations and best practices in the midst of chaos. Educators were, thus, left mostly to their own devices to re-invent the wheel in a week or two. Just as healthcare providers continually re-evaluated and re-assessed the measures they put in place; educators utilized the intersession to re-evaluate and prepare anew. With the benefit of more than a year of hindsight, educators have begun the follow-up process of assessing the damage and evaluating their emergency and post-emergency

measures. Unsurprisingly, the damage is considerable. Anxiety and depression (Stephensen, 2021) are up; math and reading scores (Dorn et al, 2020; 2021) are down. Failure has increased (Fulton, 2021). Yet there are also successes, however small, which should shape our future pedagogy, just as virtual appointments will remain a useful tool in healthcare. This chapter explores the adaptation of one face to face (F2F) course to a remote learning format at a small liberal arts college that previously offered no hybrid or online courses. Moreover, the course itself focused on American voting behavior in the midst of the most divisive election in recent memory.

Existentialism, Self-Authorship and Knowledge Construction

Existenz philosophy in the work of Martin Heidegger sets out to identify the elements of a uniquely human existence. For Heidegger, we exist in the world with the potential to understand our own uniqueness, which derives in part from our individual place in the world. Each individual's situation in the world must be understood as comprising three integral parts: *thrownness, falling prey* and *projectivity* (Heidegger, 1997). *Thrownness* refers to the fact that we find ourselves as beings in the world in ways that are not of our own making or choosing which may restrict not only our ability to choose but also our ability to really *live* which is to say our prospects of achieving transcendence. Thrownness is characterized by a profound lack of agency and in many cases reveals the socio-political limitations of agency in a particular historical context (Schürmann, 2008, p.89). Thrownness refers to individual characteristics – physical, social or intellectual capacities which condition our manner of being-with others in the world. *Thrownness* intrudes upon the present from the past. Moreover, one's individuality is constituted in the present from the thrownness of the past. There is vulnerability inherent in and revealed by *thrownness*, which is the only component of human existence which is almost entirely past in its temporal orientation. *Falling prey* or *fallenness* is the present experience which arises out of the condition of thrownness.

Falling prey or *fallenness* involves a move away from authenticity or transcendence toward an everyday mode of taking care of things. Heidegger refers to the collective or public realm that lures indivdiuals away from transcendence and the search for an authentic selfhood as the 'they': an amorphous, collective blob characterized by preoccupation with mundane trivialities. It is not an event which can "befall Dasein like an accident," (Derrida, 2016, p. 116) but rather it is a mode of being in the world, which is to say it is an omnipresent, fundamental characteristic of the way we engage with others. Our manner of *being-with* is conditioned by the constant possibility and high probability of being seduced by the everyday, by the pressing need to take care of things, complete tasks, by the appeal of idle chatter and material objects. In Heideggerian terminology, we are constantly at risk of succumbing to the 'they' (*das Man*). It is a movement away from our discovering our own potential, away from self-understanding and transcendence. Heidegger describes this movement as both seductive and tranquilizing, which suggests a profound, perhaps ever present, temptation to join in the everyday activities and distractions which prevent us from moving purposefully toward the fulfillment of our own potential. Falling prey is the present experience which impedes one's future prospects of genuine self-understanding.

Project or *existence* is the component of care which is futural in its orientation. Projectivity occurs when the individual, from its state of fallenness, undertakes a forward motion toward fulfilling its own potential. The transcendent individual acts with agency, if not necessarily planning or forethought, in an effort to overcome the limitations of its present condition. Moreover, the transcendent individual takes her Self up as a project and works toward finding her own voice and carving out her own future, in other words, discovering her potential. The futurally oriented motion associated with taking one's Self up as a

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