

Personal Educational Philosophy

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Introduction

My personal educational philosophy is still evolving. However, there are a few principles that I would like to explore here as foundational elements of my educational outlook.

Human nature

I believe that human nature is inherently noble, and this is a cornerstone of my personal educational philosophy. Nobility necessarily implies that the deepest impulses of humanity are cooperative and not competitive, especially regarding education. We learn in relation to others, through support and encouragement and by sharing our best ideas with groups to make them better. It is significant that so many prominent philosophers in the Western tradition have based their proposals on a definition of human nature that is benevolent and cooperative.

Confucius recognized that all philosophy is based on a definition of human nature, and he defined it as benevolent and cooperative. It is unfortunate that our contemporary culture seems to disagree entirely with this assessment by characterizing people as selfish and competitive. There are few things more destructive than seeing people as selfish and competitive, especially for educators. Unlike other philosophers, Aristotle did not focus exclusively on what society needed from its citizens but rather he saw rationality in all human beings, curiosity in all. All human beings need education to form their rationality so that they can make informed decisions. Education helps each person reach their potentiality and become fully human. Calvin's efforts to establish public schools for all children that taught them to read and write is founded on principles of equality and on a belief in the capacity of all people to reason, to make ethical decisions, to work honestly and to support cultural institutions that care for the general welfare of society. Comenius boldly set forth that through a proper education, people and social institutions would be transformed from relationships of rivalry and contention to

relationships based on cooperation. From this we can infer that he believed that cooperation and peaceful resolution of problems reflect human nature.

Many people today prefer to see human interaction through a lens of rivalry, and this makes sense considering that our economy, our political system, our judicial system, and many social institutions, including schools, are inherently adversarial. Western culture in general and its institutions take for granted that benevolence and cooperation are reserved for the private sphere while competition and selfishness reign supreme in public life. For this reason, it is phenomenal that Comenius interpreted human nature to be essentially cooperative and nonviolent considering the horrors he lived through and considering that war and contention were so ubiquitous and seemed so natural at the time. In fact, it is phenomenal when anybody today raises their voice to defend a posture that humans are cooperative and nonviolent because the dominant theory of human nature is still that humanity is adversarial, that we learn and work best through competition. Centuries of senseless conflicts and the resulting prejudices have proven that this view of human nature only empowers those with power, only serves to divide us further and makes our efforts towards dialog and understanding nearly impossible. I agree with Comenius and I think that all of the evidence of history and religion indicates that we are naturally cooperative and generous. I believe that all effective educational philosophies are based on this view of human nature.

Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Wollstonecraft, and Owen are other philosophers that espouse this same perspective. To make her argument for equal education, Wollstonecraft asserted her belief that “human beings are born with an innate sense of truth, the power of rationality” which needs to be stimulated by a proper education. I agree with this assessment of human nature, and I think it is essential to establishing educational practices that respect all children regardless of their background. Education that stimulates an innate sense of truth believes in children’s abilities to distinguish truth from falsehood and helps them to hone their capacities to find truth on their own. In other words, this type of education

believes in student abilities to learn to learn and become independent of their teachers. In contrast, if we do not believe in an innate sense of truth and rationality, we coddle students, we tell them the formulas and the answers and ask them to fill in the blanks in other people's work instead of making their own contributions to learning.

Education for social stability or change?

A central element of every educational philosophy regards education as a protector of the status quo or as a source of social change. There are philosophers that advocate for one side or the other throughout history. Confucious, Erasmus, Spencer and Bagley argue for static education that upholds traditional knowledge and value systems. Owen, Pestalozzi, Dewey and Addams are examples of philosophers who advocate for schools as agents of social change.

There is a tension in modern curricula in the United States in which schools are "expected to play the diametrically opposed roles of being agencies of both social stability and social change." While these are opposed, they live together for a reason: we value stability but abhor excessive concentrations of power in politics and in business, at least in theory. In reality, the United States thrives on power concentrations and has demonstrated this repeatedly in every imaginable sphere of society by ignoring oppression it justifies as necessary to gain wealth. Our curricula skirt around this issue and give lip service to more superficial changes and methods of change and ignore structural issues that truly require change if we are to live up to the ideals set out in our constitution and its amendments.

Progress made by society is hard-won and needs to be valued and preserved. However, the means to arrive at that progress are just as important and need to be valued and preserved to avoid stagnation. Two central concepts define the vision for schools. First, that humanity is noble as we stated above, grounds the fact that when education is carried out properly, it can uplift any degenerated person, family or community. In fact, education is the only path to social reform because violent

revolution will engender further violence. In other words, humane education leads to a humane society. Love is the center of Pestalozzi's educational method for this reason. This sounds like an educator's creed, or the reason educators are so passionate about our profession. We can see both the personal and social transformations happen when education is carried out properly.

Second, schools are learning institutions. Learning about the past, or how to continue with past policies is a superficial and partial learning that has masqueraded for deep learning. For example, when we teach history as a series of events, names, dates and declarations, we convey to students the message that history has no relevance to our contemporary situation. Nothing could be further from the truth. The debates that provoked any historical event may have evolved or have been adapted over time, but those debates are still happening in one form or another today. Seeing how people approached them in the past can help us make better decisions today. This is why we learn from history to make a better world for our future, which is very different from learning about history.

Dewey's view on this subject is enlightening. It is important to emphasize Dewey's view that schools are an appropriate space for students to help direct the course of change in society. Change is inevitable because people learn, and circumstances respond to our learning and the innovations that derive from it. To be more precise, rapid change is now inevitable. I cannot justify a single reason anybody would want to shield students from this inevitable process of change. Rather, as Dewey asserts, students should understand how our society works, with its strengths and weaknesses and use what they learn in school to propose solutions and carry them out.

Educational curricula are a blueprint for the society the authors want to see take shape. For this reason, curricula should project towards the future and help prepare our students to be leaders in a future society that will be better than our current society. Further, in light of systemic oppression – settler colonialism, racism, denial of basic human rights, economic oppression, gender violence, among

other abuses – that far too many people experience in contemporary society, the education advocated by Confucius and other philosophers aimed at social stability is inappropriate.

Quality over quantity

If I could develop curricula, I would question the need for efficiency in education as espoused by Spencer. In the name of efficiency, people have established break-neck speed assembly lines in meat packing plants where many people are injured, animals are mistreated, and rights are violated. The same can be said for agriculture when processes are industrialized, and quality is sacrificed. Often efficiency is equated with higher profits and the combination is dangerous.

I would not bring efficiency into education as the concept is used today. I would prioritize quality over quantity because quality gives students the ability to think deeply about any subject and make intelligent decisions. I think giving students time to think, to explore, to ask questions and look for answers with a teacher to facilitate is a worthy investment. I think more students would intrinsically value education that way.

Methodology

Methodology is another key element of any educational philosophy. Plato, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Owen, Froebel and Addams make significant contributions to defining effective educational methodologies. Plato's epistemology rested on our ability to engage in civil conversations that pique our curiosity and provoke reflection about the origin and merit of our ideas. Dialog as espoused by Plato and Addams, provokes our inherent capacity to listen, to reflect, to reconceptualize and change. It seems to me that this is Plato's true epistemology, our intellectual capacity to respect one another, to learn in community, to advance in our thoughts in order to become better people and citizens.

Rousseau and Owen encouraged schools to shelve textbooks and move towards experiential learning in nature. I see very little value in textbooks in education because they usually impede learning and curiosity by framing their narrative as the absolute truth. No learning can take place when a textbook has already expressed the absolute truth! Experiential learning, as Froebel also advocates, on the other hand, puts students and teachers on an equal footing for learning together by discovering how universal axioms look in local environments. This conveys the message to students that they are learners, that they can always learn in their local environment and that learning is valuable.

As to the mechanism of education Pestalozzi believed that it unites the home with the school and the community. Beyond local communities, Pestalozzi could foresee that human community extends even to the global level, uniting peoples with different languages, cultures, and beliefs. This belief dictates methodology as education should move from what is immediate, direct, and simple to what is more distant, remote, and abstract. It is unfortunate that nearly 200 years later we need to be reminded of these important principles of education because even now most curricula start and finish with the abstract and remote and spend little if any time on what is immediate, direct, and simple. The insight that Addams shared with Dewey that many schools had become isolated from the realities and issues of a changing society is still relevant today. Her response to work with migrant communities is a powerful way to challenge the educational authorities of the time to make education more relevant to student needs and experiences. She sought to use education as a means to preserve the best that each unique ethnic heritage had to offer to the larger society while uniting all Americans in a shared vision of the nation's meaning, purpose, and mission. Educational philosophies have emerged over the past 25 years to revive Pestalozzi's focus on the immediate, direct, and simple and they are now gaining prominence worldwide. The most prominent example is Education for Sustainable Development promoted by UNESCO.

Material – Spiritual balance

My educational philosophy seeks to balance material and spiritual education. As an example, I appreciate the efforts Aquinas made to understand the relationship between the body and the soul. I think he came quite close to getting things right. The mind is a faculty of the soul, and it is intimately related to the brain. The brain without the mind is useless. Because the mind is a faculty of the soul, it is essentially spiritual, it is noble, it is powerful beyond our imagination, and it outlasts the body. Recognizing the true nature of the mind would revolutionize our educational system. We would no longer focus exclusively on the brain and on material pursuits. Rather, we would see the brain and material pursuits within a larger spiritual context, and we would seek a balance between the brain and mind development. A better material – spiritual balance in education would lead to a better material – spiritual balance in society.

Comenius also made important contributions to this topic. He stated that science complements the Bible to provide fuller knowledge of God's universe. Universal knowledge would lead everybody to knowledge of God, the great unifier. Complete knowledge would lead people closer to God and to each other. Knowledge of God would lead people to establish peaceful societies.

Each human being has a two-fold purpose. The first is to transform one's own character and the other is to contribute to the transformation of society. These purposes are complementary and on-going. Education must address both of these purposes to be meaningful. The central focus of our material and spiritual education is to embody the oneness of humanity. Humanity is a single entity even in its amazing diversity. Humanity is like the waves of the sea, or the branches of a single tree. Seeing each other in this light is the fundamental task of education because it implies how we build our society in a noble, cooperative way that fosters deep and continuous learning.

Various

Finally, my educational philosophy would be incomplete if I did not mention other key aspects that would require a document of much more ambitious scope to explore fully. I will mention them here in list form in the name of brevity.

- Humanity is an integral part of a web of life.
- There is an ancient wisdom that governs nature that humanity must learn to fully tap into and permit to flow.
- A fluid approach to traditional academic disciplines that can be best described as multidisciplinary.
- A fluid approach to formal and non-formal education so that curricula can be seen as a hybrid between these two types of education.
- There are two parallel forces happening at this moment in the world. The vestiges of institutions that represent a previous order that may have made sense at a particular time are disintegrating and at the same time new institutions with new foundations are slowly emerging.

Education takes on meaning when it holds as its central tenets the following:

- That which empowers students to take responsibility of their own learning,
- That which motivates students to ask critical questions about themselves and relationships to others.
- That which establishes justice.

I would prefer to elaborate on these last points and because they make an important contribution to my overall educational philosophy. For example, integrating non-formal education into the educational model would get students out into the community more, and have greater interaction with community members, which would make their education more relevant. However, further elaboration on these points would extend this essay beyond its limit.

Conclusion

If I had to choose one of the elements mentioned in this paper to implement, I would choose the concept of quality over quantity as I think that encapsulates much of my philosophy. Curricula would become less dense and less busy. Teachers would have time to explore concepts in depth with students and not worry so much about “covering” extensive materials. Nor would teachers worry about preparing students for standardized tests that will be forgotten immediately afterwards. However, quality over quantity is not a philosophical argument for better education and so it rests on the philosophical foundation of the other elements mentioned above in which people and their processes are valued over metrics, scores, rubrics and grades.

Reference

Gutek, G. L. (2001). *Historical and philosophical foundations of education: Selected readings*. Prentice Hall.