

A Brief Exploration and Comparison of the Major Teaching Philosophies

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As I was listening to one of my favorite songs on my iPod, I thought about all of the talent, skills, and technical knowledge that contributed to this basic pleasure. There are artistry and songwriting talents to be appreciated for originating the music, as well as a multitude of specialties involved in coordinating the harmony of instruments and lyrics. Also, a great deal of scientific expertise was instrumental in creating the plethora of technological factors involved in bringing the music from its originators to my iPod. I cannot neglect to acknowledge the many varieties of technical and mechanical prowess that were capitalized on to construct the musical instruments and to manufacture the iPod itself. Although these components represent a wide range of skills, talents, and interests, it is easy to see that no single of these factors could be deemed the most important.

Additionally, one would likely agree that in order to be successful at this venture, each specialty must perform to the best of its ability. Furthermore, none from the spectrum of musical audiences would be well-served if any of the players felt satisfied to perpetuate their status quo and ended their efforts of development. This line of thinking can be applied to the large variety of phenomena that drive the practice of education. Just as all of the individual forces behind bringing music to an audience differ and must work together toward their mission, the myriad of individual ideologies and players in the field of education must work together and be recognized for their capabilities and their limitations.

To elucidate understanding and thoughts about educating, I will begin by expressing some thoughts about each major teaching philosophy. After speculating on their likenesses and differences, I will conclude with ideas of what a complete and excellent education should be.

Liberal Philosophy: Critique and Reflection

The outstanding hallmark of the liberal education philosophy is its primary objective to develop the intellectual, moral and spiritual capacities of its students. Rather than placing the main focus on the actual material at-hand, efforts are aimed at underlying intellectual development to enable learners to autonomously extrapolate their learning to life. Ultimately, it is hoped that learners gain a sense and desire to continue self-directed learning and transformative thinking throughout their lifetimes.

This vision of fostering unconstrained lifelong learning is present in the other prominent educational philosophies as well. The characteristics that set the liberal ideology apart are the subject areas that it focuses upon, the teacher-student relationship, and the methods of instruction. These distinguishing traits support its belief that the best and only way to gain full intellectual, moral, and spiritual development is through a wise instructor who delivers content involving writings from the Western Canon. Specific characteristics of the student and his society are irrelevant to the educational process. Although these techniques have produced valuable learning experiences for hundreds of years, this philosophy's confinement to its material and lack of recognition of the dynamics of changing society and its people have weakened its overall effectiveness and popularity. While these noble efforts are unquestionably useful in their dissemination of transformative learning, they cannot stand alone to meet the educational needs and demands of today. Rather, they should be thought of as a very important facet of a well-rounded education.

Progressive Philosophy: Critique and Reflection

Much like their liberal counterparts, progressive educators strive toward giving their students the ability to engage in reflective, active, lifelong learning. The main differences include the subject matter used in this process, the learner-centeredness, the inclusion of current events and technical subjects, and the methods of teaching. The defining characteristic that inspires this line of thinking can be seen in its fixation to connect learning to the learner. Intellectuality is developed through current and relevant subject matter as well as through reflective and practical applications. Progressive educators look at the effects of the instructional process on the learner through exploring his actions, beliefs, and motivators. In doing so, this philosophy answers needs for practicality in education and is inspired to action over contemplation. Also in keeping with the pragmatic nature of this philosophy, the systematic approach of the scientific method was introduced to education. This philosophy gained its greatest momentum with the industrialization of society when the student base was vastly expanded to include learners who were drawn to education in order to gain job-related technical knowledge.

Incorporating the learners' experiences into the learning process became popular during the time that progressive education overshadowed liberal beliefs and practices. Rather than focusing on ideas of the past, the importance of ideas of today came to the forefront. The focus shifted from ancient and historical thinkers to the learner himself and his society. This philosophy also introduced the concept of scrutinizing educational effectiveness which was a great contribution to educational improvement and expansion.

Behaviorist Philosophy: Critique and Reflection

With the liberal tradition schooling us on contemplative thinking, and the progressives inspiring our pragmatic interests, behaviorists saw a need for objectivity monitor our educational efforts. Rather than intellectual development and philosophizing, these thinkers directed our focus toward external, observable human behavior. This, along with concepts of reinforcement and methods of practice are the defining characteristics of the behaviorist educational philosophy. While these ideas fall far short from encompassing the entire spectrum of human development, learning, and capability, they do have their usefulness in the educational arena. Systematic methods of evaluation and feedback, as well as supporting positive attributes in the process of educational practice can be highly beneficial to our educational efforts. However, these must be continually scrutinized with a critical eye for pertinence and reliability.

While there are problems associated with this philosophy's exclusive focus on the measurable, it has many uses that are highly appropriate and legitimate, particularly in the adult sector of education. Behaviorist methods help to ensure that programs adhere to pre-set goals. They can also be an excellent means of communicating progress to students as well as program heads. Additionally, its methods of connectionism have valid suitability in many subject categories.

Humanist Philosophy: Critique and Reflection

This line of thinking has much in common with progressive thinking in its methodologies, as well as in its vision of the relationship between teachers and learners. The primary difference is that while progressives focus more on the culture and situations of the learner, humanists focus more on the individual himself. Consideration of various

learning types, interests, and styles by this line of thinking is a key attribute in this philosophy's efforts to challenge all learners. While this philosophy's efforts to respect individuality are important it is also unquestionably important that we understand the bigger picture of how we fit into our societies and our world.

Belief in learner motivation is a trademark this educational methodology in its methods that involve self-direction. This philosophy should be applauded for its recognition that humans are instinctually inquisitive, interactive, and drawn to self-actualization.

Radical/Critical Philosophies: Critique and Reflection

Although these philosophers may or may not appreciate the comparison, they do have a little common thinking with other philosophical disciplines in that they strive for transformative and autonomous intellectual development. The primary characteristic that is unique to this philosophy is that rather than focusing on perpetuating the development of individuals and their societies, it focuses on identifying imbalances and encouraging change therein. In doing so, they foster reflective learning and cultivate feelings of empowerment toward repairing societal ills. Learners are encouraged to respect their own qualities as being no less valid and insightful than those of the instructor. Many times, this philosophy elevates and glorifies societal underdogs.

At first glance, the idea of recognizing social inconsistencies and injustices may seem to be the epitome of intellectuality. However, in actuality, those who place their primary focus on the bald phenomenon of change could be considered narrow-minded in that they fail to recognize positive and working elements of culture. The critical mind

that most educators strive to cultivate should be open to both the ideas of change and celebration.

The great thing about this educational philosophy is its clearing the pathway for educating under-educated individuals. Thanks to these thinkers, we have learned to look at all classes of people in our educational efforts.

Postmodernist Philosophy: Critique and Reflection

This philosophy is difficult to succinctly summarize as it contains a rather diverse collection of forms and themes. The underlying motive of these educators seems to be to direct learners to examine underlying thought processes and to call attention to alternative perspectives. Through these considerations, learners may gain a more comprehensive and insightful view of their world and its people. Another worthy contribution of this philosophy is its direction to “think outside the box.” This can potentially invoke new discoveries and constructive introspection. However, its lack of respect for the many accomplishments of other practitioners of education gives this philosophy a feeling of narrow-mindedness in that it neglects to consider the myriad of great triumphs and successes that education has accomplished. Also, its lack of attention to constructive proposals, ideas, and improved practices prevent this philosophy from becoming truly operational.

Postmodernists’ direction toward critical examination of all practices and beliefs can serve to improve and enhance the field of education. Until the field of education reaches a status of perfection, postmodernist devil’s advocacy will provide worthy challenge and insight to our evaluative measures. We must remember, however, that

although our practices are certainly not perfect, they do have an impressive inventory of successes.

Comparison of the Philosophies

Primary Goals

All of the prominent educational philosophies strive to advance learners toward a primary goal. Behaviorists aim to change the overt behavior and capabilities of their students. For liberal, progressive, humanist, radical, and postmodernist, the ultimate goal is to instigate self-directed, ever-developing intellectual growth in their students. This is reflected in the words of some of their foremost supporters. As liberal education scholar, Robert Hutchins states, liberal education “aims to help the human being learn to think for himself, to develop his highest human powers” (as cited in Merriam, 1995, p. 7). John Dewey, well-known progressive philosopher and educator, states that “the aim of education is to enable individuals to continue their education – or that the object and reward of learning is continued capacity for growth” (p. 96). Carl Rogers, a noted humanistic psychologist, states that, “the only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn...” and that education should aim to “unleash curiosity; to open everything to questioning and exploration.” (as cited in Merriam, 1995, p.91). Also, as cited by the *Rage and Hope* website, Henri Giroux, a founding theorist of critical pedagogy, states that teachers must be able "to think critically, locate themselves in their own histories, and exercise moral and public responsibility in their role as engaged critics and transformative intellectuals" (1999).

Although they have commonality in their primary goals, each school of thought uses its own teaching strategies, focuses on its own distinctive subject matter in its efforts

toward its goal, and has different viewpoints as to the role and character of society and education in human development.

Ultimate Outcomes

Where the goal of intellectual development should lead differs among the philosophies. Liberals believe that full intellectual development leads to a moral and virtuous life and perpetuation of common humanity according to the Western Canon. Progressive educators strive toward a goal of supporting democracy and its continued improvement in their vision of a fully knowledgeable society which can support common humanity as well as social modifications. Radical educators believe this should result in learners being able to identify and solve the problems of humanity. Humanists believe in the ultimate outcome of self-actualization and individuality. Behaviorists believe in the acquisition of various pre-sought aptitudes. Finally, postmodernists strive to instill a sense of curiosity and broadmindedness in learners through inspiring them to challenge all beliefs and consider all perspectives.

Teaching Strategies

These philosophies have several variations and commonalities in their teaching strategies. The strategies of liberal educators revolve around critical and contemplative exercises using reading and dialogue under the supreme direction of the instructor. Radicals use critical and contemplative techniques as well, but include problem-focused dialogue and have a diminished emphasis on the role and authority of the instructor. Progressive and humanist educators employ experiential, inductive activities to stimulate discovery and foster intellectual development. Both of these philosophies believe the instructor should act as a guide who organizes and facilitates the learning experience. In

contrast to all of these, behaviorists focus on environmental manipulations to promote specified learning outcomes. Postmodernists do not support any certain theme of teaching strategy, other than that which would be considered unorthodox by current standards.

The subject matter that each philosophy chooses to use in their educative efforts is a defining characteristic that gives each philosophy its own individual flavor. Liberal educators believe that intellectual development has its beginnings in the educational forum and focuses on historical works that represent the framework of Western thought. Progressive educators believe in developing intellect through experiences gained prior to and during the formal education process. Progressive educators go on to extend the realm of education to include pragmatic subject matter as well, such as technical and vocational skills training. Behaviorists exclude intellectual development from their educational practices, but cover a collection of varied topic areas, each being highly specified according to the goal-at-hand. Humanists also do not confine themselves to particular subject areas or periods of time, but they always center on the learners' self. Radicals' primary focus is on social phenomenon, with particular interest in material that illustrates imbalances that exist therein. Postmodernists' focus lies primarily on searching for underlying and alternative meanings.

Forming a General Educational Philosophy

First and foremost, educational efforts should be directed toward the achievement of a goal set primarily by the learner, as well as toward inspiring everlasting, self-perpetuated, whole-minded thought.

Learner Focus

It is important to know who our learners are, what they are looking to achieve, and how we can best assist in this achievement. Information gathered by the NCES gives us a useful snapshot of the adult learner and supports some assumptions made by the theory of andragogy, originated by Malcolm Knowles. These infer that adults are self-directed toward development of characteristics that are connected with their roles and aspirations in life, and they are internally motivated.

Specifically, as of 2005, NCES studies indicate that almost half of all adults in this country formally pursue education. Their most-often cited purpose for engaging in education was occupationally-related, such as employee training and development, preparation for a new career, or to earn some level of degree or professional certification. These purposes are closely followed by adults declaring personal interest as their motive. In addition to these statistics on adults pursuing formal education, the NCES estimates that more than half of all American adults engage in informal and non-formal education.

This demonstrates that today's American adult learner is unquestionably motivated and goal-oriented. As educators, it is imperative that we understand and address the features and nature of the goals that bring adults to our forum. Furthermore, we must do our best to understand the prior knowledge, experiences, and character of each particular group of learners that we address. From there, we can fashion our teaching around these phenomena.

Purpose and Goals

The purpose of education should be to cause learners to accomplish and proliferate their goals. If both ventures are successful, learning would ultimately become the focus and responsibility of the learner.

The wide array of educational purposes that may present themselves is illustrated by the variety of basic motives behind the existing well-known educational philosophies. Individuals may be drawn to education for a slew of reasons including the desire to learn skills, aptitudes, or behaviors; interests in upholding or challenging society and culture; or efforts to further develop personally, intellectually, or spiritually. The mission of educators must be to understand and address these purposes, according to their own areas of concern and expertise.

Consequently, educators must recognize that learners are drawn to them through their needs. We must do our best to answer these needs. During this process we must endeavor to move the learner on to further steps toward the process of growing their minds.

Learning

The concept of learning is surprisingly difficult to confine to a simple definition or statement. In searching for a definition, many arise. Two examples that nicely summarize this concept are as follows:

The Merriam Webster Dictionary (2003) defines learning as:

- to gain knowledge or understanding of or skill in by study, instruction, or experience
- to memorize...to come to be able... to come to realize

- to come to know...
- to acquire knowledge or skill or a behavioral tendency

The American Heritage Collegiate Dictionary (1978) provides the following definition of learning:

to gain knowledge, comprehension, or mastery of through experience or study; to fix in the mind or memory; memorize; to acquire through experience; to become informed of, to find out

To augment these basic dictionary definitions, there is a quite a collection of human learning and development theories and philosophies. Although they have significant differences, they do agree that learning and development is some format of progressive events beginning with the simple and evolving toward the more complex. An example of this thinking was nicely summarized by adult learning and development scholar, Robert Kegan (1998), in saying that learning is “transforming our epistemologies, liberating ourselves from that in which we are embedded, making what was a subject into object so that we can have it rather than to be had by it – this is the most powerful way I know to conceptualize the growth of the mind” (p. 34).

To best foster the learning process, it is important to assess where our learners are in their development, what their life circumstances are, and what will elevate them toward further development. Education can and should be an important component in enhancing this process.

Methods, Subject Matter, and Environment

There is quite a wide variety of teaching strategies in existence to choose from. The question that lies before an educator is “which one should I choose?” The answer is, “it depends.” Methods supported by each of the prominent educational philosophies all have demonstrated considerable success. Their legitimacy depends on the situation-at-hand. No particular one of these philosophies has universal application.

The foundation for the methodologies that one can support lies in giving the highest level of consideration and respect to all aspects and characteristics of the learner. This is well-reflected in the framework behind the humanist and progressive traditions. In doing so, the educator will create an encouraging environment that is paramount in accommodating the learning process. Likewise, the instructor must have the respect of the students – not as a dictator or supreme authority, but as a facilitator who is knowledgeable and experienced in the subject-at-hand. Another important facet of this foundation for the optimal learning environment should consist of open lines of communication between the learners and instructors.

In addition to establishing a constructive environment, relevant subject-matter should be presented by the instructor. The material must have the capability to illustrate, connect, and demonstrate the learning to the learner. A general, but flexible, framework would begin with an instructor’s verbal address which includes expectations, subject matter with direction toward further contemplation, problem-solving propositions, and/or experiential explanation. This should be reinforced using dialogue techniques which invite learners’ initial thoughts and observations regarding the subject-at-hand. The learners can then be directed toward specific reflection and activity. The learning can be

reinforced or transformed through subsequent dialogue or activity which promotes further contemplation.

The foremost personal characteristic in myself that I vow not to change is my appreciation for and curiosity about the views of others. I believe that my perpetual strives to understand the thinking of others will contribute to my own introspection. I found this to be the case while I was reading the articles in *Selected Readings on Philosophy and Adult Education*. All of the authors are well-respected, intelligent scholars who hold a diverse array of standpoints. While I thought they were all interesting and contained good insight, I identified best with the authors who felt that education should focus on underlying ideas and reflective thought. For example, one of my favorite passages was when Bergevin stated that when education directs us to “follow certain ideas blindly, we lose those helpful values that might exist within the ideas themselves” (p. 41)

Summary

All of the philosophies have important and useful applications. To illustrate this, I will briefly explain how each of them contributes to educational thinking:

Liberal Philosophy:

The characteristic subject matter of the Western canon has great value, and should never be excluded from the educational arena. However, since much time has passed since the creation of these works, their relevance can be difficult for many students to apply, and their scope too narrow.

Progressive Philosophy:

How this tradition has responded to the weaknesses of the liberal education are reflected by the words of John Dewey in his statement that, “A knowledge of the past and its heritage is of great significance, when it enters into the present — but not otherwise. And the mistake of making the records and remains of the past the main material of education is that it cuts the vital connection of present and past, and tends to make the past a rival of the present and the present a more or less futile imitation of the past” (p. 86). Also, this philosophy’s inclusion of a broad spectrum of areas for study which respond to the needs of society and its people make this philosophy comprehensive and outstanding.

Behaviorist Philosophy:

There are legitimate uses for this philosophy’s focus on observable results, and its support of evaluation-based education. However, these characteristics also severely limit educators’ ability to address the entire array of needs that exist.

Humanist Philosophy:

The basics of this are similar to those of its progressive counterpart. The main idea that believing in and respecting our learners should be present in all educational efforts.

Radical/Critical Philosophy:

There is a time and place for this philosophy’s focus on change. The idea of working with the existing system should also be considered as a worthy and valid venture. However, this philosophy’s efforts in challenging the many aspects of society and education have, and will continue to have, important and valuable impact. A good

educator should continually and critically evaluate their own practices and beliefs in order to optimally adapt the educational experience to the ever-changing learner who exists in an ever-changing environment.

Postmodernist Philosophy:

This philosophy's challenge to creatively consider alternatives to current practice is a valuable exercise in critical evaluation. However, this must be done with an eye toward action. Criticism alone is quite useless unless it suggests or inspires constructive action or new direction.

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