

Education: The Right to Create Understanding

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For students to learn and actually understand, they have to be invested in the work that is being done in the classroom and the curriculum in general. Candid, engaging teachers facilitate this learning by giving them opportunities to make meaning of curriculum, take ownership in their educational experience, and formulate their own opinions about the world. The purpose of education, therefore, is to produce autonomous thinkers who can navigate through diverse perspectives to find their niche in the world.

Contrary to Humanist beliefs that the “motivation to learn is intrinsic in humanism,” all students are not eager to learn in the school setting (Cohen). Therefore, it is the teacher’s task to inspire within students a spirit of self-motivation and interest in new and complex material. Learning takes place when students are able to absorb material, interpret it through personal experiences, and apply it in real-life contexts. When they do this, their education becomes personalized. This Progressive philosophy speaks to the opportunity students have to be active members of the learning process in “mak[ing] meaning through his or her individual experiences in the physical and cultural context” (Cohen). When they are able to interpret information through the lens of their own life, it becomes tangible to them. However, this does not mean that the teacher should let the class go on the whims of student experiences. Instead, experiences must be beneficial to the student’s learning. “Intelligent activity is distinguished from aimless activity by the fact that it involves selection of means – analysis – out of the variety of conditions that are present, and their arrangement – synthesis – to reach an intended aim or purpose” (Dewey 62). To ensure that learning takes place, teachers must have fluid lesson and unit plans that allow for experiences to be used not only to reinforce what was learned in the past but also to set up what will be learned in the future.

Teachers must allow students the opportunity to think for themselves and construct their own understandings. In doing so, they must avoid teacher-centered instruction where there is little divergence from the teacher's mouth to the student's mind. This is the traditional, seemingly Behavioral construction of education, "one of imposition from above and from outside...impos[ing] adult standards, subject-matter, and methods upon those who are only growing slowly toward maturity" (Dewey 15).

Students do not learn when they are simply given inert knowledge that they have no use for. This is seen when teachers practice coverage in preparation for high-stakes tests. "Knowledge learned for US-high-stakes tests is thus transformed into a collection of disconnected facts, operations, procedures, or data mainly needed for rote memorization in preparation for the tests" (Au 31). Educational pedagogy points to the Constructivist model in the way that teacher acts as a coach to steer students towards certain fundamental concepts. Certain Constructivists, such as Lev Vygotsky, believe that learning takes place through social interactions (Hackmann 697). In practice, students work collaboratively to help one another and create their own understandings of material. This is where education should be, with teachers urging children to be inquisitive, active thinkers, conscious of the world around them and where they fit into it. Paulo Freire used this as the basis for his "circles of culture" technique (Gadotti & Torres 1256). Children and adults collectively learned how to read and write through discussion of issues prevalent to them while associating their words with pictures to acquire language. Freire's work extends into contemporary times much in the same way Vygotsky's constructivist approach did; through collective work, students are able to uncover information themselves and relate it to one another in personal, meaningful ways. In

order for this to take place though, curricula must be set up in a way that gives students the necessary skills to build complex understandings.

Foundational skills, regardless of the subject, give students the means to tackle authentic tasks. They are necessary and must not be disregarded. However, the focus cannot be bogged down by the events and writings of Western civilization in the past, as Perennialism focuses on (Sadker & Zittleman). The past must not be disregarded in the curriculum, though. Instead, it must be prominent, but not supreme, in standing alongside of contemporary works to give the students a balanced perspective. In the case of a tenth grade English class, this is seen in the teaching of *Julius Caesar* by William Shakespeare as means to understand the hubris that drives Willie Loman to suicide in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Curriculum also must be representative of the students learning it and the diverse society that they live in, offering them characters of mixed cultural, socioeconomic, and sexual orientations they can relate to. "Despite the fact that he had been a history major in college...he knew very little about Mexican History...I thought about what it had been like to grow up as a Latino child in U.S. public schools, never hearing anything substantial about my own history or the contributions of Latinos to this country or the world" (Darder 119). When students see themselves in the curriculum, the material becomes personal to them enabling stronger connections and understandings. In short, curricula must be challenging but, at the same time, practical to the student. It must give students the necessary skills to pursue their ambitions.

Without education, a student's options in life are severely limited, if not completely nonexistent. In accordance with Freire's teachings, "the role of education is not conceived as one of *instilling* hope but rather of evoking it and providing it with

guidance” (Webb 329). Education gives students futures. With that in mind, the purpose of education is to mold free-thinking individuals who have a base of knowledge to think critically in relation to the world and solve complex problems within it. While everyone will not be an agent of social change as Freire saw as the purpose of education under his Critical Theory, education should produce adults who can make statements, support them with knowledge, and stand behind them in action. To this extent, education is synonymous with freedom in that it gives students the opportunity to not only make choices but to make them wisely. “[Freire’s] reflections have deepened the theme that he pursued his whole life: education as the practice of freedom” (Gadotti & Torres 1265). In accordance with Constructivist pedagogy, students need opportunities to work together to construct meaning. This contributes to an important, yet minimized purpose of education: the development of requisite social skills and respect for varied beliefs necessary to interact with others in the real world. Finally, the purpose of education is to instill an inquisitive spirit in students that allows them to recognize that, even after classroom learning has ceased, the educative process continues on. This is very Humanistic in that it presupposes that all humans have some kind of educational interest; however, with the right teacher, every student has the ability to find his/her place in society.

Education must be inviting, engaging, easily accessible but, in the same instance, challenging, problematic, and complex. While education is opportunity, students need to be made aware of all the bountiful possibilities that come with attaining an education. This is the teacher’s role; in demanding the most of his/her students through engaging and diverse curricula, experiential learning, and candid discussion of contemporary

issues, the teacher enables his/her students to formulate their own opinions and ultimately become active members of society. All students should have this opportunity; hopefully, one day they will.

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