

My Philosophy of Education

By Jonathan Visona

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Preface

Education is perhaps the most important force in the world, perhaps, outside of gravity. It is the means by which a society grows and maintains itself, and the process an individual undertakes to facilitate personal growth. In this way, a balance is stricken between the needs of society and the needs of the individual. This philosophy of education is an idealistic exhortation. It is not a handbook for day-to-day activities, but an appeal to principles that should be considered when making decisions about those activities. I recognize that practical concerns mean that systems of education often fall short of these ideals. But ideals are important because in the course of events if ideals are ignored, standards fall, and education suffers. What follows are the principles to be administered in an ideal world to maximize the positive effect of formal education and to guard against cynicism.

Introduction

Mirroring the debate between the Classical Rationalists and Empiricists, education might be understood in two ways. In the first way, it appeals to Aristotle's notion of the *tabula rasa* wherein society seeks to make an impression on the student so that the student can conform to society. In the second way appealing to Kierkegaard, existence precedes essence, and the individual must acquire from the world what they need to become an authentic person. Much ink has been shed over these two views, and it is fair to say that under a classical notion of liberal education, a balance is struck.

On the one hand, a learner simply cannot do and think whatever they want without regard for society. A student is not free to declare themselves educated but rather assents to the expertise of the teacher and honors the conventions of mores, folkways, and language. On the other hand, a teacher is not allowed to reject the fundamental dignity of the student. A teacher cannot simply insist that they are right without regards to empirical truths and rational argument. Rather, liberal education is an agreement that circumscribes the authority of the teacher, but also denies the student the freedom to ignore the authority of the teacher. Students and teachers, then, are both empowered with reasonable freedom to maximize their individual perspectives in a way that mirrors Rousseau's notion of the social

contract. This philosophy largely stems from UIC's Van Cleve Morris's *Existentialism in Education* and Howard Gardner's *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness Reframed*.

The Clauses of Liberal Education

Student Individuation

Students should be encouraged to make their own choices within the framework of their school. It is not the role of the teacher to dictate the wider questions in the education, but incumbent upon the teacher to encourage the student to grow and take responsibility for their successes and failures. Teachers have wisdom and expertise, and they must discriminate, but such discrimination should be confined to topical matters as set out in a course description and enumerated in a syllabus.

Education should empower students to take responsibility for their own growth and development from the time they matriculate to the time they graduate. A student should be allowed to decide on their majors and minors. A student should be allowed to schedule courses in a consistent fashion. A student shall be endowed with both rights and responsibilities by the institution.

Existential Responsibility

Education should instill a sense of existential responsibility in students by making them aware they are agents who must choose and accept the consequences of their choices. Parents, teachers, and administrators must strive to prepare the student for the challenges of freedom during and after the education. Students must be encouraged to understand their ethical role in obtaining and applying knowledge.

Students should be encouraged to confront their own existence and the choices that come with it. While traditional methods of education sometimes externalize the locus of control from the student, a student in liberal education must see themselves as autonomous engaged in a process of self-recognition. As an aware and active participant in the world, the student must be encouraged to internalize their locus of control.

Individuated and Authentic Experience

Learning experiences should be authentic and meaningful to each student. At times, the student must endure some topics which may not be interesting, easy, or simple. It is the role of the teacher to challenge the student, but the student should be allowed to voice their opinion, exercise their rights, and find ways to individuate the experience to maximize their education.

The focus should be on real-world applications rather than abstract knowledge except where the real-world application is the mastery of abstraction. This is to say that the right balance between practice and theory should always be a major priority in instruction. Doing is, indeed, the best form of learning.

Action Rather Than Theory

Practical applications should take precedence over theoretical knowledge. Rote memory and recall are an important part of any education; theory is a short-cut towards expertise. But it is in praxis where competency in a topic is demonstrated. Although testing is necessary for appraisal, the best measurements are those of observable behaviors and self-reporting.

Students should be encouraged to apply their knowledge rather than recite from memorization. Whether it is to demonstrate proficiency of speech, engage in argumentation, or to conduct laboratory or engineering skills, liberal education asks the student to challenge themselves to integrate competency across cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains.

Subjectivity

Education should foster individual subjectivity. Courses and instruction should not merely encourage students to imitate others. Rather, education should empower students to analyze and synthesize thinking uniquely to their own path.

Liberal education rejects a one-size-fits-all approach to learning; each student's path should be as individualized as possible. A teacher is often incapable of teaching each student in a group individually, however, a teacher can affect positive instruction by finding various ways to individualize in a variety of impactful ways. While a teacher may not be able to provide one-on-one instruction to all students in a group setting, they can enhance instruction by recognizing diversity and finding impactful methods to differentiate.

Freedom to Question Authority

Students should be encouraged to question authority and traditional methods of education. Such questioning is not a license to be disruptive, but rather an opportunity for students to engage in meaningful critical thinking; this should be valued by teachers. In questions where the student questions authority, the teacher should work to persuade students that the authority is fair, competent, and indispensable, and consider the validity of the student's criticism of authority reflecting whether positive changes can be had.

Nearly synonymous with liberal education itself is cultivating critical thinking and independence in learners. Critical thinking relies on methods of formal and informal reasoning and a broad recognition of empirical facts.

Becoming Rather Than Being

A teacher should emphasize personal growth and development over mere acquisition of knowledge. It is too easy to prioritize content over the student's well-being. But a liberal education is one in which the ultimate goal is to cultivate whole beings. A student's welfare to some degree should matter to a teacher.

The emphasis should be about guiding students to work on becoming who they want to be, rather than simply being what society expects. Certainly, a student is a part of their society, but a healthy, democratic society that embraces diversity of thought requires that a student is true to themselves.

Uncertainty, Ambiguity, and Complexity

Education should acknowledge and work with the uncertainty and ambiguities of human experience and language. What liberalism entreats us to become are agents who are personally responsible for our stake in society, not reliant on external forces to be intellectually capable, moral agents. Even in a discipline, individual practitioners need to have the capacity to critically evaluate and solve problems.

Given the existence of multiple perspectives and truths, students should be taught to navigate complexity. As the world becomes increasingly intricate in terms of information, knowledge, and relationships, a teacher should work to empower students to cope. Students should have the ability to affect positive changes in a complicated world.

Meaning-Making

Education must help students create their own meaning in life. While individual course content aspires to certain ontological and epistemological aims, they should serve the greater purpose of fostering meaningful and self-directed student ability and experience. It is not the role of the school to tell the student who to be, but rather to help the student to discover the best version of themselves.

Thus, in any course material, students should be encouraged to explore their values, beliefs, and purposes. No domain of competency is without values and claims or functions in a vacuum with regard to goals. A teacher should find ways to consider how content can be used most effectively by a student.

Heuristics for This Philosophy of Education

- Teachers should do their best to be facilitators rather than authority figures. It is not the job of the teacher to police, but to exhort.
- The curriculum should be flexible and adaptable to individual student needs. While a teacher cannot teach each student as if they were the only student, the teacher should seek reciprocal relationships with students to shape the pedagogy.
- Projects and hands-on learning experiences should be prioritized over traditional lectures. Flipping the classroom and encouraging students to participate in Socratic dialog is superior to merely casting pictures and words at students and demanding regurgitation.
- The teacher should find ways to promote self-directed learning and exploration. It is important that the student not simply passively receive information, but participate in a meaningful exchange.
- Regular reflection and self-assessment should be encouraged throughout the educational process. Journaling and activities that prioritize student introspection above grading should support reflective and introspective content generation used to assess the broader dimensions of education.