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Reconstructing the Vocational-Liberal Studies Controversy

Abstract

Throughout North America there is a general recognition that public school curricula, particularly at the secondary level, need to be revised and reformed. With this recognition, the vocational/liberal studies controversy in education that opened the twentieth century has resurfaced with a new sense of urgency at its close. In the course of pointing out close similarities in both the earlier and current manifestations of this debate, the article argues that contemporary educators would do well to revisit John Dewey's thinking as they go about determining and solidifying their position on this important and divisive issue.

Résumé

Dans toute l'Amérique du Nord, on admet généralement que les programmes des écoles publiques, surtout au niveau du secondaire, doivent être révisés et réformés. Cela étant, la polémique sur la formation professionnelle et les études libérales qui dure depuis le début du XXI^e siècle a de nouveau fait surface avec un certain sentiment d'urgence en cette fin de siècle. En soulignant les analogies qui existent dans les manifestations anciennes et actuelles de ce débat, les auteurs de l'article déclarent que les éducateurs modernes feraient bien de revoir les réflexions de John Dewey avant de solidifier leur position sur ce dossier important qui sème la discorde.

Many controversial issues in education seem to reappear with predictable regularity as a function of the sociopolitical and economic conditions of the times. One of these issues, the technical/vocational-liberal studies controversy that engaged educators at the beginning of the

twentieth century, has returned as a major focus of interest at the end of it. Throughout the first few decades of our century, the philosophical debate concerning the intrinsic purpose of education in a democracy involved a range of issues similar to those that many educators are debating today, issues made more poignant by North America's continuing high levels of unemployment. Then as now, the contentious question is: should public education be geared towards the specific business and industrial-technocratic needs of society, or is its major function to provide a general education for society's young people in a broad range of subjects in the liberal arts, in mathematics, and in the natural sciences (Barton, 1990; Corson, 1991; Daggett, 1991; Downey, 1991)?

Prior to World War I, the educational and business-industrial communities both agreed on the need for educational and social reform; likewise they agree today. Because of contemporary socio-economic problems, the current interest in education as a vehicle for social improvement has generated an abundance of literature on educational reform from both the educational and business-industrial communities alike (Armstrong, 1989; Carnevale, 1989; Choate, 1986; Corson, 1991; Dole, 1989; Dunham, 1986; LeBold, 1990; Simon, 1991). A reading of this literature suggests that many of the stakeholders in education believe that school curricula must be created that cater to society's need for skilled workers who have technological, scientific, and communicative expertise, as well as to society's pressing need for citizens who are equally sensitive to humanistic concerns.

As a first step to devising secondary school curricula that meet both these needs, we believe educators would do well to re-examine the historical literature pertaining to the educational reform movement in the early decades of this century, particularly to John Dewey's contribution to that debate. However, any contemporary reading of Dewey's work must be tempered with the understanding that his educational philosophy was developed within the context of a markedly different social and cultural era than our own. When Dewey first produced influential works like *The School and Society* (1900), *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902), and *Democracy and Education* (1916), North America was in the throes of the Industrial Age of modernity; now, the western world has stepped irrevocably over the threshold of the postmodern world (Connor, 1989; Harvey, 1989; Jameson, 1991). The faster pace of life, the instant availability of information, and the concomitant needs for the newest knowledge and for the most improved and effective telecommunication systems has firmly established in our minds the image of the world as a global village. Therefore Dewey, as the educational philosopher of modernism, might be considered an outmoded source for initiating fresh thinking about curricular reform in the Information Age of postmodernity.

However, we believe many of the arguments he contributed to that early debate are worth reiterating because we believe, with Dewey, that in emotional debates of this sort we must never lose sight of the human factor.

In this article we first provide a brief historical reminder of the vocational-liberal studies controversy that evolved during the first few decades of the twentieth century. Second, we examine Dewey's contribution to that debate and follow this with an analysis of some of the same kinds of problems that seem to confront educators today. Finally, in light of this discussion we advance our views on the type of educational arrangements we feel are required now at the end of the twentieth century.

Historical Overview

An inquiry into what students ought to learn in school occurred in North America at the beginning of the twentieth century. Prior to and during the nineteenth-century, traditional classical studies were offered to those fortunate enough to attend secondary school because, generally speaking, those students continued on to university. However, in the 1890s and early 1900s, American high schools in particular experienced a growing number of students who wanted a high school education but who did not necessarily intend to continue academic study after graduation. The natural consequence of this situation was for educators to inquire into the relevancy of the existing high school curriculum (Corson, 1991; Schubert, 1986).

Out of these inquiries, two central issues evolved around the question of what knowledge was most worthwhile, and if a traditional classical education was suitable for preparing young people to deal with the realities of life after high school in the modern workplace. The response from the educational community to these questions is recorded in the literature documenting the heated and divisive debates produced by the report of the Committee of Ten and especially to the subsequent report by the Committee of Fifteen (Cremin, 1961; Franklin, 1986; Schubert, 1986). In 1918 the National Association's Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education published its important report, *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*, a report that, typically, was considered too traditional by some educators and far too liberal by others. These events resulted in the emergence of three general models for thinking about curriculum, models which Schubert (1986) has labeled intellectual traditionalism, progressive experientialism, and social behaviorism.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the new social sciences of psychology and sociology influenced many educators. Edward L.

Thorndike argued for an educational system based on scientific principles. His work, along with Herbert Spencer's theory of social Darwinism, Joseph Meyer Rice's work on social efficiency in education, and the works of social behaviorists, Franklin Bobbit and W. W. Charters, gave rise to the social efficiency movement in education, a movement that looked to science not only to reform and improve educational institutions but ultimately to change society as well (Schubert, 1986).

Two social efficiency advocates, David Snedden and Charles Prosser, were largely responsible for developing the scientific technocratic model of education in the United States. They advocated training programs based on principles of S-R [stimulus-response] psychology, and a curriculum specifically designed to meet the needs of industry. Both felt schools should create more relevant programs for the new socioeconomic conditions of post World War I America.

Snedden, a conservative social Darwinist, felt the goals of education should be to support scientific corporate capitalism, to enable each child to mature to be the kind of citizen who contributes to a well-functioning society like a good player contributes to a winning team, and to help society function with the greatest degree of efficiency. He also thought students could be categorized into ability groups, and that with scientific tests and measures schools could differentiate them into specific programs of study that would channel them into appropriate careers (Wirth, 1991, pp. 56-57).

Prosser's goal as executive secretary of the National Society for the Improvement of Education was to improve vocational education in America so that high schools could train adolescents effectively for useful employment.

The scientific work of Thorndike reinforced Prosser's opinions, and he recommended vocational students have real, hands-on work experience instead of "pseudo" classroom experiences. Thus his commitment to a "pure", work-based vocational education led him to strive for separately administered vocational institutions.

The third curricular movement to emerge out of this historical period was the Progressive Movement. As the indisputable, vanguard thinker of the Progressive Movement, John Dewey maintained that education must be rooted in the direct, immediate experiences of the child, and that the school must be considered an important force for improving society. In *School and Society* he presented his philosophy of building an educational curriculum based on the needs of the people for whom the schools exist. In *The Child and the Curriculum* he stressed the impor-

tance of a child-centered curriculum built upon the experiences of the child. In *Democracy and Education*, perhaps his most influential book on education, Dewey presented the idea that since school is a microcosm of the society it serves, the aim of both should be reciprocal cooperation to ensure the growth of democracy in the larger society, as well as achievement and success in the personal lives of individual citizens. These three concepts were the cornerstone ideas of the Progressive Movement. Dewey argued that the aim of education should be a meaningful process of reflection on and inquiry into social problems. As such it would develop into a "science" with the goal of continuous social improvement. Consequently, Dewey disagreed with his social behaviorist colleagues about their advocacy of separate vocational schools.

Dewey felt vocational and academic education should not be taught separately but should be taught in such a way that by complementing and enhancing one another the liberal arts might "humanize" the industrial arts. Dewey's thinking was not influenced by social Darwinism to the same extent that Snedden's and Prosser's was; therefore, he was appalled at the idea of vocational schools separated from academic schools. To him, such institutions would be completely undemocratic and Dewey felt strongly that if society wanted to educate democratically-minded citizens, the youth of that society must be educated in comprehensive schools governed by those values. Moreover, he felt that combining vocational and technological studies with liberal arts studies could do two things: it could "revitalize school learning and eventually aid in social transformation" (Wirth, 1991, p. 62).

Dewey saw the combination of an academic and a technological-vocational program of studies as mutually beneficial. In *Education Today* (1940) he wrote,

Instead of trying to split schools into two kinds, one of a trade type for children whom it is assumed are to be employees and one of a liberal type for the children of the well-to-do, [we must] aim at such a reorganization of existing schools as will give all pupils a genuine respect for useful work, an ability to render service, and a contempt for social parasites. (pp. 131-132)

He felt strongly that vocational, technological, and business courses develop in all students sequential and creative thinking skills as well as a knowledge of and insight into the manufacturing, transportation, and business sectors of society. This knowledge would benefit everyone regardless of the ultimate career path one chose to follow.

Problems Confronting Educators Today

When people are unemployed, one of the first places they turn to for help is educational institutions, with the understandable expectation that more education in subjects attractive to employers will make them more employable. This happened in the Great Depression of the 1930s and it is happening again in the persistent recession of the 1990s. With more students attending high school than ever before, with larger numbers of dropouts dropping back in and adults returning to school in unprecedented numbers, one of the most crucial questions today is: What principles should guide us as we re-think our senior years' curricula – the social efficiency model, the liberal studies model, or some eclectic combination of the two? In posing these questions again in this way, we are operating from the premise that any move towards educational reform ought to be grounded in an analysis of some fairly obvious social problems and needs. Of the many problems confronting North American society, we have isolated for comment four that we think are most pressing in light of the revival of the vocational-liberal studies controversy: incomplete education, marginal achievement and illiteracy-innumeracy, lack of employable skills, and a significant change in the employment scene itself in North America.

Incomplete education

One of the most important problems in the 1990s is the large number of young people with an incomplete education. As the Conference Board of Canada states:

Canadians are increasingly aware that education, because of its impact on our social well-being and economic prosperity, is one of the most significant public issues facing Canadians One of the most important of these problems is a high school dropout rate that stands at 34 percent – meaning that one in three Canadian high school students fails to graduate. (1992, p. 1)

Furthermore, figures from Employment and Immigration Canada show that currently only 53% of all jobs in Canada require at least twelve years of education; they further predict that by the year 2000, 65% will require at least that much schooling (Conference Board of Canada, 1992, p. 1). Likewise, the message from contemporary employers is clear. In order to secure employment in the 1990s and beyond, young people will have to be both well educated and diversely skilled. To this end, university entrance programs in high schools serve the purposes of university and college bound students quite well. However, educators need to pay

more attention to those high school students who do not continue their studies beyond high school graduation (Barton, 1990; Downey, 1990). Not only the authorized curriculum but also the hidden curriculum of teachers, counsellors, and administrators, who are for the most part products of liberal arts educational institutions themselves, “teach” that a post-secondary education is the superior path for students to follow. Role models from business and industry who have chosen other routes to success are rarely introduced to students in school settings. Almost the entire curriculum at the secondary school level is slanted towards providing knowledge to the minority of students (30%) who choose to enroll in post-secondary schools. The other 70% who choose to enter the workforce are almost virtually ignored in terms of relevant, meaningful experiences related to the world of work (Barton, 1990).

In order to correct this imbalance, a new way of viewing the role of the school and its relationship to the work world is required. If we attend to Dewey’s advice this means a change in philosophical perspective with an emphasis away from the traditional, school-centered, academic focus, to include a more flexible community-centered, career-oriented one. Today’s problems cannot be solved by our continuing to use

... the same level of thinking with which we created them [because the] traditional concepts of school and work came from the factory model [of the social efficiency technocrats which is] highly structured and individually competitive. But while the work model is changing and becoming more open to worker interaction and group effort, schools have stayed with the ‘old model’. (Educational Testing Service, 1990, p. 17)

Marginal achievement – illiteracy – innumeracy

During the 1970s and 1980s parents and students focused their interest on university and college preparation courses often with little comprehension of what post-secondary education actually involves academically and intellectually. The result in North American high schools is that a large percentage of university entrance graduates have unimpressive marks, only marginal academic abilities, and most go directly into the workplace with few workplace readiness skills.

Many of these marginal students take general track programs and are for the most part disengaged from, and lack commitment to, formal education. Many feel that if they do not take university entrance or precollege courses with their perceived higher status they somehow diminish their post-graduation opportunities. Loathe to take vocational,

industrial, or business education majors because of the social stigma attached to them in the eyes of their peers and parents, these students choose to follow a general track which has little definite focus in terms of academic or career preparation. In general tracking, students are most often offered a "modified" university entrance program which is neither organized, sequential, coherent nor goal-directed for technical post-secondary institutions, vocations, or careers (Barton, 1990).

In 1968, 12% of students in high schools in the United States registered for "thin education" general track courses; by 1990, this figure had risen to fifty percent. Furthermore, studies in the United States indicate that two out of three high school dropouts there had been enrolled in nonspecific, general track programs, where, in some parts of the country, the dropout rate is 40% (Educational Testing Service, 1990, p. 6). This further supports the perception that the high school curriculum in North American schools is one of the factors behind the alarmingly high dropout rates. These high school dropouts should not be so easily dismissed as social throwaways for they represent one-third of the high school population, and it seems conceivable they might form the core of considerable social problems in the future.

In 1987, the Southam literacy study uncovered the following disturbing fact. At least five million Canadian adults, including 17% of high school graduates, cannot read, write, or do mathematics well enough to meet basic literacy/numeracy requirements. Additionally, Statistics Canada found only 62% of adult Canadians are functionally literate while "a further 22% are low-level literates who can handle only simple reading in familiar contexts" (cited in Downey, 1991, p. 6-13).

Furthermore, in this postmodern Information Age, the meaning of literacy is changing. Now, not only does it refer to reading and writing ability levels, but also to scientific and technological understanding. Workers in the twenty-first century will have to be able to understand, interpret, and use an ever-increasing amount of new knowledge. If human knowledge is doubling every five years, literacy in its broadest definition must become "the unifying element of all learning programs [which use] not only words and numbers but also ideas, values, and relationships" (Downey, 1991, p.16). The inescapable conclusion is that continuing high levels of illiteracy and innumeracy means chronic unemployment for the functionally illiterate.

Lack of employable skills

The world of work awaiting high school students of the 1990s is remarkably different from that of any other previous decade. It seems

that our students are graduating from North American high schools with an education that is essentially no better in relative terms than that received by their grandfathers.

Increasingly, employers are expressing the opinion that many of the students graduating from high school are virtually unemployable. It appears that one of the main reasons for this is that when employers criticize the education of graduates they are assessing them in terms of the work skills they will be **required** to perform in the workplace while educators assess them on school assignments which frequently have little or no relationship to work-related tasks. This is the essence of the debate over preparedness. Schools and employers are talking about very different things. Reading, writing, and mathematics proficiencies (as taught and measured in school) are not synonymous with work literacy and numeracy. This difference in perception of preparedness is one major reason why so many employers judge high school graduates as inadequately educated. Interestingly, it was Dewey himself who warned us of this precise problem. Dewey predicted:

As societies become more complex in structure and resources, the need for formal or intentional teaching increases. As formal teaching and training grow in extent, there is danger of creating an undesirable split between the experience gained in more direct associations and what is acquired in school. (cited in Barton, 1990, p.12)

The changing employment scene

Futurists warn that job security and single life-time careers will be luxuries of the past. Workers will have to be able to learn on the job, retrain, upgrade skills constantly, and switch careers repeatedly. Since 1950 there has been a statistically significant change in the types of jobs available to workers. In 1950, 60% of the North American workforce was unskilled, 20% skilled, and 20% in professional management. By 1989, 35% were unskilled, 35% were skilled, and 30% were in professional management. It is estimated that by the year 2000, only 15% of the labor force will be unskilled, 45% will be skilled, and 50% will be required in professional management, more than double in fifty years (Daggett, 1991). Thus the world of work has changed dramatically since the 1950s but many school programs have essentially remained the same.

There is a troubling gap between the knowledge and skills society needs and what the school systems are offering. Consequently, the quality of the Canadian educational system has become the subject of serious inquiry by many business, industrial, and community leaders. Among

them there is a general awareness that our society needs committed educators who are cognizant of labor needs in society, new societal values and trends, and the needs of the economic climate in the local, the national, and the international communities. They want educators who can develop in students the willingness and the ability to learn well, to think critically and creatively, and to solve problems cooperatively and constructively. Also, they want a reformation of technical-vocational education programs in high schools to improve their image and to work in partnership with business and industry to keep courses of study current with changes in the workplace. These advocates of school reform are insisting that a business and education partnership be established to "satisfy a need for educated, verbally and technically literate graduates who must have the ability to learn, because the one thing we know is that what people know and understand today is going to be obsolete in about half the time it used to be. That's why business has a sense of urgency on the issue of educational reform and educational performance" (Educational Testing Service, 1990, p. 6).

Conclusion

Recognizing that the learning needs of the majority of high school students are not being met, modern day progressive educators of a Deweyan persuasion have identified three potential solutions: 1. facilitate dialogue between educators and the business and labor communities, regarding school program content; 2. involve business, industry, and labor in effective work-based training programs; and 3. convince local communities that educational reform involving applied pedagogy is a very important issue affecting about 70% of our adolescents who go directly from high school into the world of work.

In order for educators to create curricula that will provide students with the knowledge they will need for success they must be fully cognizant of the fundamental changes that have occurred in society generally, and in the world of work particularly. They must be willing to re-evaluate their own ideas about what constitutes "good" education and be aware of the changing nature of work. They must confront the fact that there are massive problems threatening the stability of North American society and for this reason they must recognize the necessity for restructuring educational institutions so that more relevant and meaningful learning experiences can be provided to help students cope in a rapidly changing world.

We contend that educators today would do well to reconsider the merits of the Deweyan approach of combining academic and vocational-technological programs of study. In addition, we believe that any such

approach must also include a commitment to the principle of lifelong learning, because learning is becoming increasingly an integral part of work. In order to continue to learn, workers must have a solid base of fundamental knowledge and skills on which to build. For the most part, this knowledge can only be obtained from elementary and secondary school curricula. Futurists and sociologists have consistently maintained that knowledge will be irrevocably connected to success. For example, Toffler (1990) states:

Today, in the fast-changing, affluent nations, despite all inequities of income and wealth, the coming struggle for power will increasingly turn into a struggle over the distribution of and access to knowledge. This is why, unless we understand how and to whom knowledge flows, we can neither protect ourselves against the abuse of power nor create the better, more democratic society that tomorrow's technologies promise. (p. 20)

If knowledge is going to be the key to success in the future, it is the important responsibility of educators to design learning programs which will prepare young people effectively for the competitions, changes, and challenges that they will certainly face in the future. We must resolve that an undereducated, untrained, unskilled workforce is unacceptable and a shameful waste of the potential of our youth.

At the present time North Americans are feeling particularly threatened by social change owing to the rapid pace of technological advances. Part of this apprehension involves the fear that educational curricula are being adjusted to accommodate the new sciences and technologies often at the expense of more humanistic concerns (Postman, 1992). As we have shown, for a balanced perspective, Dewey's writings once again remind us that the sciences, technologies, and humanities can be equally well accommodated in one common curriculum. Public education does not have to be **either** liberal studies **or** workplace training; it can and should be a complementary combination of the two.

As educators, we must ask ourselves what type of education makes sense for children and adolescents to be acquiring today? If we wish to continue to uphold the principle of equality of educational opportunity for all, a principle that is fundamental to the North American democratic ideal, then we have to support Dewey's arguments that academic and technical-vocational schools must not be separated, that academic and technical-vocational learning programs must be made to complement and enhance one another, and that by designing learning experiences which allow our students to examine and theorize about the nature of social

problems, they will stand a better chance of ultimately transforming and transcending them.

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