

Section III - Philosophical Perspectives in Education Part 3

Educational Philosophies

Within the epistemological frame that focuses on the nature of knowledge and how we come to know, there are four major educational philosophies, each related to one or more of the general or world philosophies just discussed. These educational philosophical approaches are currently used in classrooms the world over. They are Perennialism, Essentialism, Progressivism, and Reconstructionism. These educational philosophies focus heavily on WHAT we should teach, the curriculum aspect.

Perennialism

For Perennialists, the aim of education is to ensure that students acquire understandings about the great ideas of Western civilization. These ideas have the potential for solving problems in any era. The focus is to teach ideas that are everlasting, to seek enduring truths which are constant, not changing, as the natural and human worlds at their most essential level, do not change. Teaching these unchanging principles is critical. Humans are rational beings, and their minds need to be developed. Thus, cultivation of the intellect is the highest priority in a worthwhile education. The demanding curriculum focuses on attaining cultural literacy, stressing students' growth in enduring disciplines. The loftiest accomplishments of humankind are emphasized— the great works of literature and art, the laws or principles of science. Advocates of this educational philosophy are Robert Maynard Hutchins who developed a Great Books program in 1963 and Mortimer Adler, who further developed this curriculum based on 100 great books of western civilization.

Essentialism

Essentialists believe that there is a common core of knowledge that needs to be transmitted to students in a systematic, disciplined way. The emphasis in this conservative perspective is on intellectual and moral standards that schools should teach. The core of the curriculum is essential knowledge and skills and academic rigor. Although this educational philosophy is similar in some ways to Perennialism, Essentialists accept the idea that this core curriculum may change. Schooling should be practical, preparing students to become valuable members of society. It should focus on facts—the objective reality out there—and "the basics," training students to read, write, speak, and compute clearly and logically. Schools should not try to set or influence policies. Students should be taught hard work, respect for authority, and discipline. Teachers are to help students keep their non-productive instincts in check, such as aggression or mindlessness. This approach was in reaction to progressivist approaches prevalent in the 1920s and 30s. William Bagley, took progressivist approaches to task in the journal he formed in 1934. Other proponents of Essentialism are: James D. Koerner (1959), H. G. Rickover (1959), Paul Copperman (1978), and TheodoreSizer (1985).

Progressivism

Progressivists believe that education should focus on the whole child, rather than on the content or the teacher. This educational philosophy stresses that students should test ideas by active experimentation. Learning is rooted in the questions of learners that arise through experiencing the world. It is active, not passive. The learner is a problem solver and thinker who makes meaning through his or her individual experience in the physical and cultural context. Effective teachers provide experiences so that students can learn by doing. Curriculum content is derived from student interests and questions. The scientific method is used by progressivist educators so that students can study matter and events systematically and first hand. The emphasis is on process—how one comes to know. The Progressive education philosophy was established in America from the mid-1920s through the mid-1950s. John Dewey was its foremost proponent. One of his tenets was that

the school should improve the way of life of our citizens through experiencing freedom and democracy in schools. Shared decision making, planning of teachers with students, student-selected topics are all aspects. Books are tools, rather than authority.

Reconstructionism/Critical Theory

Social reconstructionism is a philosophy that emphasizes the addressing of social questions and a quest to create a better society and worldwide democracy. Reconstructionist educators focus on a curriculum that highlights social reform as the aim of education. Theodore Brameld (1904-1987) was the founder of social reconstructionism, in reaction against the realities of World War II. He recognized the potential for either human annihilation through technology and human cruelty or the capacity to create a beneficent society using technology and human compassion. George Counts (1889-1974) recognized that education was the means of preparing people for creating this new social order.

Critical theorists, like social reconstructionists, believe that systems must be changed to overcome oppression and improve human conditions. Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was a Brazilian whose experiences living in poverty led him to champion education and literacy as the vehicle for social change. In his view, humans must learn to resist oppression and not become its victims, nor oppress others. To do so requires dialog and critical consciousness, the development of awareness to overcome domination and oppression. Rather than "teaching as banking," in which the educator deposits information into students' heads, Freire saw teaching and learning as a process of inquiry in which the child must invent and reinvent the world.

For social reconstructionists and critical theorists, curriculum focuses on student experience and taking social action on real problems, such as violence, hunger, international terrorism, inflation, and inequality. Strategies for dealing with controversial issues (particularly in social studies and literature), inquiry, dialogue, and multiple perspectives are the focus. Community-based learning and bringing the world into the classroom are also strategies.

Think about It:

- 1. Which of these educational philosophies would you describe as authoritarian? Which as non-authoritarian? Why?*
- 2. Each of the educational philosophies relates to one or more of the metaphysical world view philosophies. What connections do you see?*
- 3. Which educational philosophy is most compatible with your beliefs? Why?*

Section III - Philosophical Perspectives in Education Part 4

Related Theories of Learning (Psychological Orientations)

Related to both the metaphysical worldview philosophies and the educational philosophies are theories of learning that focus on **how** learning occurs, the psychological orientations. They provide structures for the instructional aspects of teaching, suggesting methods that are related to their perspective on learning. These theoretical beliefs about learning are also at the epistemic level of philosophy, as they are concerned with the nature of learning. Each psychological orientation is most directly related to a particular educational philosophy but may have other influences as well. The first two theoretical approaches can be thought of as transmissive, in that information is given to learners. The second two approaches are constructivist, in that the learner has to make meaning from experiences in the world.

Information Processing

Information Processing theorists focus on the mind and how it works to explain how learning occurs. The focus is on the processing of a relatively fixed body of knowledge and how it is attended to, received in the mind, processed, stored, and retrieved from memory. This model is derived from analogies between how the brain works and computer processing. Information processing theorists focus on the individual rather than the social aspects of thinking and learning. The mind is a symbolic processor that stores information in schemas or hierarchically arranged structures.

Knowledge may be general, applicable to many situations; for example, knowing how to type or spell. Other knowledge is domain specific, applicable to a specific subject or task, such as vowel sounds in Spanish. Knowledge is also *declarative* (content, or knowing *that*; for example, schools have students, teachers, and administrators), *procedural* (knowing *how* to do things—the steps or strategies; for example, to multiply mixed number, change both sides to improper fractions, then multiply numerators and denominators), or *conditional* (knowing *when* and *why* to apply the other two types of knowledge; for example, when taking a standardized multiple choice test, keep track of time, be strategic, and don't get bogged down on hard problems).

The intake and representation of information is called encoding. It is sent to the short term or working memory, acted upon, and those pieces determined as important are sent to long term memory storage, where they must be retrieved and sent back to the working or short-term memory for use. Short term memory has very limited capacity, so it must be kept active to be retained. Long term memory is organized in structures, called schemas, scripts, or propositional or hierarchical networks. Something learned can be retrieved by relating it to other aspects, procedures, or episodes. There are many strategies that can help in both getting information into long term memory and retrieving it from memory. The teacher's job is to help students to develop strategies for thinking and remembering.

Behaviourism

Behaviourist theorists believe that behaviour is shaped deliberately by forces in the environment and that the type of person and actions desired can be the product of design. In other words, behaviour is determined by others, rather than by our own free will. By carefully shaping desirable behaviour, morality and information is learned. Learners will acquire and remember responses that lead to satisfying aftereffects. Repetition of a meaningful connection results in learning. If the student is ready for the connection, learning is enhanced; if not, learning is inhibited. Motivation to learn is the satisfying aftereffect, or reinforcement.

Behaviourism is linked with empiricism, which stresses scientific information and observation, rather than subjective or metaphysical realities. Behaviourists search for laws that govern human behaviour, like scientists who look for patterns in empirical events. Change in behaviour must be observable; internal thought processes are not considered.

Ivan Pavlov's research on using the reinforcement of a bell sound when food was presented to a dog and finding the sound alone would make a dog salivate after several presentations of the conditioned stimulus, was the beginning of behaviourist approaches. Learning occurs as a result of responses to stimuli in the environment that are reinforced by adults and others, as well as from feedback from actions on objects. The teacher can help students learn by conditioning them through identifying the desired behaviours in measurable, observable terms, recording these behaviours and their frequencies, identifying appropriate reinforcers for each desired behaviour, and providing the reinforcer as soon as the student displays the behaviour. For example, if children are supposed to raise hands to get called on, we might reinforce a child who raises his hand by using praise, "Thank you for raising your hand." Other influential behaviourists include B.F. Skinner (1904-1990) and James B. Watson (1878-1958).

Cognitivism/Constructivism

Cognitivists or Constructivists believe that the learner actively constructs his or her own understandings of reality through interaction with objects, events, and people in the environment, and reflecting on these interactions. Early perceptual psychologists (Gestalt psychology) focused on the making of wholes from bits and pieces of objects and events in the world, believing that meaning was the construction in the brain of patterns from these pieces.

For learning to occur, an event, object, or experience must conflict with what the learner already knows. Therefore, the learner's previous experiences determine what can be learned. Motivation to learn is experiencing conflict with what one knows, which causes an imbalance, which triggers a quest to restore the equilibrium. Piaget described intelligent behaviour as adaptation. The learner organizes his or her understanding in organized structures. At the simplest level, these are called schemes. When something new is presented, the learner must modify these structures in order to deal with the new information. This process, called equilibration, is the balancing between what is assimilated (the new) and accommodation, the change in structure. The child goes through four distinct stages or levels in his or her understandings of the world.

Some constructivists (particularly Vygotsky) emphasize the shared, social construction of knowledge, believing that the particular social and cultural context and the interactions of novices with more expert thinkers (usually adult) facilitate or scaffold the learning process. The teacher mediates between the new material to be learned and the learner's level of readiness, supporting the child's growth through his or her "zone of proximal development."

Humanism

The roots of humanism are found in the thinking of Erasmus (1466-1536), who attacked the religious teaching and thought prevalent in his time to focus on free inquiry and rediscovery of the classical roots from Greece and Rome. Erasmus believed in the essential goodness of children, that humans have free will, moral conscience, the ability to reason, aesthetic sensibility, and religious instinct. He advocated that the young should be treated kindly and that learning should not be forced or rushed, as it proceeds in stages. Humanism was developed as an educational philosophy by Rousseau (1712-1778) and Pestalozzi, who emphasized nature and the basic goodness of humans, understanding through the senses, and education as a gradual and unhurried process in which the development of human character follows the unfolding of nature. Humanists believe that the learner should be in

control of his or her own destiny. Since the learner should become a fully autonomous person, personal freedom, choice, and responsibility are the focus. The learner is self-motivated to achieve towards the highest level possible. Motivation to learn is intrinsic in humanism.

Recent applications of humanist philosophy focus on the social and emotional well-being of the child, as well as the cognitive. Development of a healthy self-concept, awareness of the psychological needs, helping students to strive to be all that they can are important concepts, espoused in theories of Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and Alfred Adler that are found in classrooms today. Teachers emphasize freedom from threat, emotional well-being, learning processes, and self-fulfilment.

**Some theorists call Rousseau's philosophy naturalism and consider this to be a world or metaphysical level philosophy (e.g. Gutek)*

Think about It:

1. *Which psychological orientations are most compatible with which educational philosophies? Explain.*
2. *Explain the differences in focus of the educational philosophies and psychological orientations. Are there also similarities?*
3. *Non-western philosophies have also influenced American education, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Native American and African American philosophies. Find out about these and think about their current influences in education and where they might possibly be of value.*

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