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World Views: Creating Significance of Learning in the Classroom

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It was another typical day in my Advanced Placement World History class. A student asked his typical “philosophical question of the day.” This particular student enjoys the more abstract questions about history. He asked, “Is there such a thing as human nature or is everything just a product of history?” I was extremely impressed by his question; but the other students were not.

Then, one of the students in the group of the “hardly interested” expressed what most of the class seemed to be thinking at the moment. “Why can’t we get back to real learning?” I pointed out that the question being asked was actually very significant. But, the class seemed to be thinking, “Could you please just tell us the answers!”

This problem demonstrates the modern narrowing of the definition of education. Society has defined an “educated” student as someone who has a reservoir of measurable and quantifiable knowledge. We have accepted this definition due to the fear of current low comprehension scores for students in math and science (Rich, 2012). And, this fear foresees the potential for falling behind in major innovations in technology, scientific research, and economic leadership in contrast to our competitors (Hanushek and Peterson, 2011). So, we have, as a society, demanded that education provide instant and measurable results through testing.

However, this understanding of education, while understandable and well intentioned, has some serious problems. This definition limits creativity unless there are direct, quantifiable results. And, this definition excludes abstract questions about the nature of human beings, their purpose, and the nature of ethical decision-making.

This article intends to expand on the definition of education by arguing three main points. First, this paper will argue that the testing environment of the last three decades has led to the problem of narrowing the curriculum to a model of scientific learning. Second, the paper will contend that this analogy of science is misplaced since current understandings of knowledge promote multiple perspectives in understanding the experience of human individuals and societies. Third, the paper will promote a worldviews teaching method because it promotes a qualitative group of different learning styles that seeks out facts embedded in significance. Finally the paper will provide specific applications for teaching worldviews in the classroom.



Section 1: Historical Considerations for Narrowing the Curriculum

The contemporary school environment is still operating on a model from a different historical period. As soldiers returned from World War II, legislators feared another Great Depression. American leaders likewise feared the rise of the USSR and its promise to lead the world through a communist model (Rosenberg and Rosenberg, 1995). These twin fears of economic down turn and international competition led to a movement for federal standards of subject areas.

US education has always had a strong local and state centered administration. However, when the Soviets launched Sputnik 1 and Sputnik 2 into space in 1957, President Eisenhower responded with the National Defense of Education Act. He assumed that the key problem with American education was a shortage of students with math and scientific knowledge in contrast to the Soviet Union. (Rothschild, 1999). This pushed states and local cities towards national standards. Still, the implementation of schooling was left for local school boards.

Fears of American competitiveness were revived again in the early 1980s with the release of the study, *A Nation at Risk*. The study was published in 1983 and established by the Secretary of Education, T.H. Bell. It included both public and private researchers. The study argued that the last two decades had allowed local schools to experiment too much. The study called for national standards that would provide clearer information and skills in each field (Ravitch, 2010). Still, though, the focus would be on providing standards as a national guideline for local execution.

At the beginning of the 21st century, a shift towards national centralization of education occurred based upon the previous decades' foundations of national standards. In 2001, President George Bush's administration pursued the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation that created a series of rewards and punishments for school reforms. This sounded like a positive reform given that it included both clear national standards and a system of school accountability (Ravitch, 2010).

However, the system became a punitive one that incentivized schools to narrow their curriculum to a technical definition of education. The NCLB legislation called for a definition of proficiency in student reading that was extremely high. This ensured that only a very low percentage of students across the country could achieve what was expected in the timeframe. Schools were threatened with teacher firings, state take over, and eventual closing down. Administrators forced teachers to remove any curriculum that would interfere with basic reading and mathematical skills. And, a high percentage of the year was now spent on test taking skills (Ravitch, 2010).



The real danger behind this new transition was the hidden assumption that education should be viewed as a “factory model” of outputs. We had accepted a model of education whereby classrooms were categorized by discipline: science, math, social science, art, vocational fields, etc. Teachers deposit information in students’ heads. Then, the students move on to the next classroom like a product moved on a conveyor belt. Then tests would be used to measure the information that students had absorbed (Changing Education Paradigms, 2010). However, these technical models of education have long been challenged as insufficient means of attaining knowledge (Kincheloe, 2003).

Section 2: Knowledge as Machine versus Knowledge as Art

For the previous several decades, philosophers have challenged the predominant model of how knowledge is discovered. The previous model comes from the French philosopher Rene Descartes (Kincheloe, 2003). Descartes established the “method of doubt”. He argued that one should reject all previously received knowledge. Then, an individual should find the one truth that could be accepted on experience. From this foundation, an individual could draw out logical connections and implications about everything else. His model of knowledge was based upon the values of objectivity, discovery, and individualism. (Kincheloe, 2003).

Immanuel Kant challenged Descartes pointing out the difference between empirical and speculative knowledge. Kant argued that one form of knowledge comes from observations of empirical reality. The second form of knowledge comes from our experiences, values, and beliefs. This latter form of knowledge is more subjective than the first. Note that Kant demonstrated that not all knowledge could be classified in the Cartesian objective manner.

But even Kant’s approach to knowledge would be dashed and undermined by a further move towards the idea of knowledge as a perspective. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche challenged the very nature of thinking as an independent and free rational exercise based on observation and experience. Nietzsche argued that all knowledge developed from projections of our psychology. This meant that our supposed free thought was really an illusion of our instincts and feelings. We justified our feelings with high-minded rhetoric and language believing we did so through individual free observation (Naugle, 2002). In reality, we were reacting to the emotional baggage that we had inherited from our community.

Postmodernists have built upon Kant and Nietzsche to point out the flaws with a Cartesian approach to knowledge. They argue that the Cartesian model of knowledge led to the desire for metanarratives or universal stories about human nature and societies. Metanarratives become foundational stories for societies to create rules for individual behavior and ethics. However, these universal stories end up structurally excluding the individual differences of minority groups (Rorty, 1979).



This postmodernist version of the development of knowledge has some very important implications. First, knowledge is understood to be a projection of the society's needs within a particular historical context. Second, knowledge is produced and given validity by the community. (Paul-Gee, 2005). Third, the community produces knowledge and validity of the knowledge to establish power relationships. The community provides the rules by which an individual can operate and produce knowledge. (Orland-Barak and Tillema, 2007).

Many people fear that this "postmodernist" viewpoint may be disastrous since it promotes everyone's perspective as equal. But, this postmodernist situation may not be as problematic as it appears. I teach in a Catholic Jesuit context whose teachings believe in a transcendent and purposeful reality (John Paul II, 1993). In our tradition, the basis to our knowledge can be gained through a variety of sources. And, we recognize that Truth is never limited to just one perspective of empirical, artistic, experiential or observational reality. Rather, all of these methods are equal and lead to a greater understanding of the mystery of Truth (McBrien, 1994). So, we may have found a corrective to the Cartesian method that prioritizes empirical and quantifiable knowledge.

Instead, what if we developed qualitative but practical tools to assess the significance of knowledge such as:

1. Do our explanations provide the most probable understanding of the information at the time while still providing the opportunity for future exploration?
2. Does our explanation work for individuals and society?
3. Does our explanation answer the needs of the individual and society at the time in a way that safeguards the dignity of the individual while also seeking the good of the commons? (Naugle, 2002)

Section 3: Worldviews

A worldview is a set of assumptions that help us to make coherent meaning of our reality. We need a set of cognitive tools that help to guide us into asking questions and then sorting out the data in order to receive answers. Worldviews provide individuals with a meaningful set of abstract filters that help to make sense of reality and help individuals to contribute meaningful action in the world (Naugle, 2002). And, they can help to address the significant, practical questions about knowledge that we developed in the last section.



This contrasts with the current infatuation with society's definition of an educated student as one with the accepted understanding of cultural facts. A worldview provides students with principles about humans, society, and relationships that lead to the evaluation of facts. A worldview allows students to argue about the organization and prioritization of facts. And, a worldview calls students to evaluate facts based upon the explicit and implicit values inherent to the significance of their point of view, not a group of measured facts.

Worldviews address the underlying questions about human beings in societies that help us to make meaningful decisions such as:

1. Are human beings basically good or evil or a combination of both?
2. Are humans essentially socially oriented or self-interested?
3. Do individuals have a purpose or is life a set of random choices and actions (Vidal, 2012).

The analogy for using worldviews in the classroom is the artist. Unlike the scientist, the artist utilizes an interpretive set of skills. These tools are a combination of her intellect, emotion, and experience. They make up her intuition that what she sees and experiences can be understood as an external sign of beauty. Her production of beauty is not based upon an absolute formula of evidence. And, the result is a statement of meaning and significance about the nature of the individual in relation to the greater reality surrounding her (Eisner, 2001). I'll provide an example of how such a qualitative approach can be used through the subject matter I teach in United States history.

E. J. Dionne recently argued that American history is best encapsulated in a binary tension between promoting individual rights versus securing the collective good. This is a purpose driven interpretation of the past. So, we have to see it if it helps us or only provides another form of power through the projection of ideas (Dionne, 2012).

First, does the paradigm that Dionne proposes fit the evidence that we have? If we look throughout US History from the days of Puritan settlements to the Civil Rights movements, we see that individuals have sought freedom from differing forms of political, economic, and racial oppression. We also find that a variety of religious and secular groups have sought out rules that would help the group both in material and spiritual means. So, the paradigm fits the evidence in a probabilistic and general sense allowing for new questions and new evaluations of the evidence.

Second, does this paradigm work for us in studying US history? The importance of individualism is found throughout US history. It is within the Declaration of Independence justifying the American Revolution on the basis of natural rights. It is found



in the Constitution's Bill of Rights justifying a series of rights in protecting the individual from federal government intrusion. And, it is found in a series of movements from the abolitionists to suffragettes to Civil Rights all promoting individual rights to be included in the definition of American citizenship. However, at the same time, we see a counterbalancing tradition of national and communal good. This includes the Constitution's balance of federal and state power, the motivation behind the Civil War to keep the nation united against a philosophy of extreme states' rights and, a number of religious revivals that stress the need for virtue in American society.

Finally, does this paradigm provide meaning and significance for students? Recent questions about taxes and gun rights are good examples in which students will be asked how to resolve conflicts between individual rights and the general good. So the use of a tension between these two issues helps teachers and students to organize the information for interpreting the conflict. This also provides students and teachers with a meaningful way to discuss the merits of both sides of the conflict.

Section IV: Suggestions for Application

I can only imagine that teachers would be very cautious to use a philosophical approach with teenagers. The approach should be pragmatic and embedded within very concrete material. And the process of reaching students should be a patient and piece meal mentality that will expect students to struggle with tensions.

There are several practical approaches within the classroom that could be used:

1. Students can participate in a Socratic seminar around a controversial text. The conversation can be centered on tensions like human versus nature, free will versus determinism, individual versus community.
2. Students can participate in a debate format. They tend to like this due to the competitive nature. And, the debate format can vary from one that forces them into a devil's advocate role. Or they can argue their own side of the debate.
3. They can use media like I Movie to create a visual project that summarizes different perspectives while still supporting their own viewpoint.

One broader approach is to provide a specific worldviews course. This idea would develop a class for worldviews in the senior year of high school. The class would take the major issues that students have learned in their previous high school classes. A teacher or a pair of teachers could teach a variety of worldviews including those of the Classical (Greek Virtues, Chinese Confucianism, Indian Hinduism, Western Christianity), Modern (Positivism, Existentialism, Natural Rights) to the Postmodern (Nietzsche, Derrida, Foucault, Rorty). Then, the students could be provided with a project that would include



multiple forms of research and public presentation to demonstrate their understanding of a worldview to a contemporary conflict.

But, there is another possible approach that takes all of the previous ideas and incorporates a further dimension of learning and education that benefits students and teachers. David Christian has developed a course called “Big History”. The course would include astronomy, physics, geology, biology, history, and philosophy. Teachers from each discipline would develop the class through common planning. The class would be broken into three-week sessions for a unit on each discipline. The teachers would create a three-week unit that covers the broad principles of the discipline to explain how the universe and its connection with human life have been demonstrated in the discipline at this point. Each section shows the interrelated connections. And, each section also focuses on the principles of the discipline to show how we understand the development of nature or human individuals/societies in this development. By the end of the course, the students can take the general principles to ask ethical questions about the nature of the universe, human nature, and potential for purpose (Christian, 1991).

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to establish the need for a more expanded definition of education. In certain contexts, the need to teach students the basic skills needed for competency is understandable. My argument has been that this definition is not sufficient as a general description for an educated student. Rather, a student is educated when he/she can take their skills and information and make original decisions about contemporary problems based upon a coherent and well-understood worldview.

Some may fear this definition of education because I am advocating for teachers to instruct students in values and controversy. The fear may be that I am opening the potential for the imposition of a single ideology on students coming from an expert or “sage on the stage” mentality. But, knowledge is based upon foundational assumptions that cannot be proven but are rather believed through a mixture of research, experience, and intuition. The teacher therefore can only act as a facilitator to help students clarify and question their assumptions.

And, in a very important manner, this type of education provides an updating of cognitive methods for best practices in student learning. Teachers have to work with interdisciplinary lesson plans. Worldviews span issues of Science, History, English expression, and Philosophical Ethics. Students have to express their points of view through writing and public speaking. Students will learn about abstract issues through real world practical projects that engage with contemporary problems. And, these types of learning techniques can lead to a variety of public presentations that have students express their ideas in formats that will be similar to what they have to engage in the real world.





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