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Mandatory Continuing Education: Considerations of Dewey and Ohliger's Work

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The key-note of democracy as a way of life may be expressed, it seems to me, as the necessity for the participation of every mature human being in formation of the values that regulate the living of men together: which is necessary from the standpoint of both the general social welfare and the full development of human beings as individuals. (Dewey, 1937, p. 457)

In a democratic society, citizens have rights and responsibilities. One of the most fundamental responsibilities is to be informed about issues and problems. For American educational philosopher John Dewey, "democracy and education are two sides of the same coin. Both involve and foster self-determination, self-development and participating in the common good, enlightened by intelligent understanding and scientific spirit" (van der Ploeg, 2016, p. 145). Dewey noted that democracy:

signifies, on one side, that every individual is to share in the duties and rights belonging to control of social affairs, and, on the other side, that social arrangements are to eliminate those external arrangements of status, birth, wealth, sex, etc., which restrict the opportunity of each individual for full development of himself. (Dewey, 1932, p. 348)

Therefore, the purpose of one's education is twofold: it must serve the goals of the person and the society in which she or he lives. In a democracy, everyone should have access to education and preparing students to be democratic citizens is our responsibility as educators and citizens.

According to Dewey, a democratic education ought to help a person figure out his or her own goals for learning. To be effective in educating students to become democratic citizens, it is important for educators to understand the nature of human experience. In *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) contrasted two extreme philosophies of education: traditional and progressive education. Dewey believed both had strengths and weaknesses. Traditional approaches to education lacked a holistic understanding and concern for the whole student. It focused primarily on the dissemination of content instead of both content *and* the context and experience of the learner. Progressive education—characterized by "the participation of the

learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process” (Dewey, 1938, p. 67)—was a radical alternative.

As a pragmatist, Dewey believed students must interact with their environment to adapt and learn. He argued against traditional models of education whereby the teacher transmitted information to students. A student may be able to memorize a lot of key facts and perform well on an exam, but what and how much of this is absorbed and retained in the long term? Instead, students and teachers must learn together. Dewey believed that education and life are interconnected. They do not exist in vacuums. Education is not so much a means to an end but an end itself. Therefore, education should be treated not as preparation for life, but as an essential core of one’s life. In this way, education should be preparing students to become independent, productive citizens.

Dewey argued that for education to be effective and lasting, student interest is essential. He rejected external goals and purposes for education. You cannot set goals for other people. Rather, people must set their own. Every goal is time-bound: it exists during the time in which it is set. One’s personal goals for learning will continue to evolve. All authentic goals for learning must come from student interest. Educators need to provide students with experiences that will shape their learning and their learning processes. It is critical that these experiences are valuable to them. Their interest in their learning is what will enable them to become valuable citizens who contribute to society. For Dewey, inquiry-based learning is

the mutual adjustment between an organism and its environment. Inquiry is the transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is determinate in the distinctions and relations that constitute it, changing the elements of the original situation into a coherent whole. (Farrell, 2013, p. 45)

Instead of transmitting information, the teacher is an architect of learning. Students must be given something to *do*, not something to *learn*. In problems-based learning, students are challenged with genuine situations of experience. The problems that the students encounter must be authentically their own problems.

Dewey argued that learning through experience is the only authentic means of getting at the everyday world in which we live. He noted, “the ability of human experience to generate the aims and methods by which further experience shall grow in ordered richness” (Dewey, 1939, p. 17) is unlimited. Thinking is always in perspective, always aimed at overcoming a disturbance. Cognitive dissonance produces human growth. Dewey also clarified the type of growth that should occur in developing a democratic citizen. He gives the example of a bank robber who can continue to improve his craft and become a highly skilled crook. However, this growth is not rooted in the values of a democratic society. Therefore, it is not only growth, but

growth in a specific direction that matters. Dewey articulated the conditions for further development:

Does this form of growth create conditions for further growth, or does it set up conditions that shut off the person who has grown in this particular direction from the occasions, stimuli, and opportunities for continuing growth in new directions? What is the effect of growth in a special direction upon the attitudes and habits which alone open up avenues for development in other lines? (Dewey, 1938, p. 36)

Dewey suggested that the answers to these questions constitute the “criteria of experience” (p. 33) to continued growth and development.

Two principles, interaction and continuity, describe “the measure of the educative significance and value of an experience” (p. 44). *Continuity* helps a person “discriminate between experiences which are educative and those which are mis-educative” (Dewey, 1938, p. 37). Every experience impacts “the attitudes which help decide the quality of further experiences, by setting up certain preference and aversion, and making it easier or harder to act for this or that end” (p. 37). In other words, every experience contributes to one’s further development, but this may not always be for the better. *Interaction* describes the interplay between two conditions—objective and internal—that form a situation. Traditional education is focused mostly on external conditions to the exclusion of internal factors of the experience. Dewey refers to this as the *Either-Or* principle. He argued that educators need to understand the nature of experience in designing effective educational experiences for students. No single experience has a pre-determined outcome or value. Similar experiences for some people may be less useful for others. A person should evaluate their experience based on how it shapes their present, future, and how it enables them to contribute to society.

The purpose of this paper is to explore discrepancies between mandatory continuing education and Dewey’s ideas on authentic learning. After discussing mandatory continuing education, we consider mandated education through Dewey’s eyes.

Mandatory Continuing Education

Mandatory continuing education is a term coined by Ohliger (personal correspondence, October 15, 1995; Ohliger, 1985). MCE refers to the education for adults being compulsory, forced, and legislated “to maintain a professional license, to keep a job, or ordered to submit to therapeutic education to remedy a deficiency” (Ohliger, 1983, p. 161). Continuing education is often required by professional associations and sometimes the state to ensure that members of

the profession have the knowledge, skills, and aptitudes the profession and state consider necessary to ensure clients are served appropriately (van Loo & Rocco, 2006). Another form of mandated education is the result of government legislation in instances where the state decided that education is preferable to incarceration. In these instances, education is used to punish and/or remediate behavior. The state also mandated educational interventions to ensure workers in certain occupations have the necessary skills, knowledge, and aptitude to perform their work safely. Ohliger believed that mandating education for anyone was dangerous as a vehicle for enculturation (Grace, 2013), created unequal power relations (Grace & Rocco, 2009), and creates the potential for institutionalized lifelong learning fostering a sense of permanent inadequacy in adults while devaluing other forms of learning (Finger & Asun, 2001).

Examining Mandated Education Through Dewey's Eyes

Although Dewey wrote his educational essays about schooling and education for children where children had little choice in the matter, we believe in *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) makes several points about what education should be that are contrary to the aims and intentions of any system or form of MCE. Dewey felt that education should (a) serve the goals of the learner and society, (b) inspire authentic goals that come from the student, (c) integrate the context and experience of the learner with the content, (d) provide interactions with the environment, and (e) promote learning through experience. In mandated education, an argument could be made that the educational content suits the goals of the state or professional association. The content supports the current knowledge and skills that the licensing body or state deems necessary. In such a context, learner goals are not considered. On the one hand, maintaining and upgrading the knowledge and skills of professionals serves to protect society from outdated practices (Queeney, 2000). At the same time, the professions that typically invoke MCE protect and limit entry to the profession through pre-licensure educational requirements and post licensure mandated education (van Loo & Rocco, 2006). The content required pre- and post-licensure is dictated by the associations and state, creating a common language and culture among these professionals. The danger is this narrow view of content knowledge could foster the attitude that education is only important if it is relevant to the profession and fosters professional skills.

The notion of authentic goals coming from the learner is ignored in MCE. In fact, mandating education or learning is against adult learning principles (Kerka, 1994). The first principle is that adults are voluntary learners who have a right to choose what to learn and abandon learning events that do not fit their needs (Knowles, 1970). Another principle is that

experience is a resource for learning. Experience, learning from problem solving, and considering the learners context are key to Dewey's ideas. MCE rarely considers the learner's experience, the problems they have faced, or the context where the learning will be used. Instead, MCE content is determined by the association, employer, and the state to support organizational goals. Experiential learning may occur in the form of an apprenticeship in some professions but generally, mandated education for the professions, workforce development, or remediation is often delivered using traditional means and is based on the traditional philosophy of education.

Possibly more troubling is that there is no way to determine if learning occurred, if the content was useful in solving problems, or if the program by chance filled a learner's needs. Another reason to mandate education is to ensure that people attend the programs. Mandating attendance does not guarantee learning. If the educational system produced students with a love of learning who naturally became lifelong learners, mandating attendance might not be necessary. But instead, as Dewey observed almost a century ago, education is treated as preparing one for life or work, not as necessary to living. If learning were considered vital to the essence of being, education would not need to be mandated.

Mandated education deprives learners of autonomy, accountability, and choice (Rocco, 2009). Although the state can determine what content is necessary for citizens to be useful and productive, it cannot mandate that learning occurs. Nor can mandating education to serve only the needs of the workforce create informed citizens, able and willing to participate in democratic discourse and deliberation for the common good. "The conception of common good, of general well-being, is a criterion which demands the full development of individuals in their distinctive individuality, not a sacrifice of them to some alleged vague larger good under the plea that it is social" (Dewey (1985) [1932] p. 348).

Final Thoughts

MCE is considered by Ohliger to be undemocratic. In his satirical piece, "Adult Education: 1984" (Ohliger, 1971), he describes a world of permanent education that begins at six months of age and goes until death. Educational content is based on major and minor life events such as retiring, job obsolescence, and citizenship training. The learner in this world of mandated education has no choices in terms of content or attendance. Dewey, we think, would have agreed that MCE is undemocratic. The irony is that both men believed in education and learning. One spent his life writing essays to improve schooling and became a household name, while the other one became an outcast by warning of the dangers of mandated education.

Although we cannot deny that educators often have their own agendas, MCE is not created or sustained by teachers. And in fact, it is questionable if individuals trained as teachers, academics or administrators in the field of education have anything to do with MCE in any form in terms of content though they are frequently enlisted to deliver this mandated content. Instead, content is determined by the state and profession—sometimes in response to citizens’ observations about the practice of the profession. For instance, in response to the issues faced by racial minorities, continuing legal education courses included a diversity component (Bowman, Rocco, & Peterson, 2009). Content is delivered by subject matter experts, frequently more experienced members of the profession or workforce. Workforce education—often delivered by workers who have degrees in training—usually provides content determined appropriate by company executives. And mandated education for remediation and punishment is often taught by a part-time worker with no voice in the matter delivering content prepared by the state.

In closing we would like to end with words from Dewey:

Only when individuals have initiative, independence of judgment, flexibility, fullness of experience, can they act so as to enrich the lives of others and only in this way can a truly common welfare be built up. (1985 [1932]: p. 348)

And words from Ohliger (1971b):

No good purpose is served by saying what bastards we all are. Instead we should devote our energies to seeing clearly the nature of the system we are a willing, or unwilling, part of. Then we need to explore alternatives, hopefully educational alternatives (p. 3).

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