

Vocational Aspects of Education

1. The Meaning of Vocation

At the present time the conflict of philosophic theories focuses in discussion of the proper place and function of vocational factors in education. The bald statement that significant differences in fundamental philosophical conceptions find their chief issue in connection with this point may arouse incredulity: there seems to be too great a gap between the remote and general terms in which philosophic ideas are formulated and the practical and concrete details of vocational education. But a mental review of the intellectual presuppositions underlying the oppositions in education of labor and leisure, theory and practice, body and mind, mental states and the world, will show that they culminate in the antithesis of vocational and cultural education. Traditionally, liberal culture has been linked to the notions of leisure, purely contemplative knowledge and a spiritual activity not involving the active use of bodily organs. Culture has also tended, latterly, to be associated with a purely private refinement, a cultivation of certain states and attitudes of consciousness, separate from either social direction or service. It has been an escape from the former, and a solace for the necessity of the latter.

So deeply entangled are these philosophic dualisms with the whole subject of vocational education, that it is necessary to define the meaning of vocation with some fullness in order to avoid the impression that an education which centers about it is narrowly practical, if not merely pecuniary. A vocation means nothing but such a direction of life activities as renders them perceptibly significant to a person, because of the consequences they accomplish, and also useful to his associates. The opposite of a career is neither leisure nor culture, but aimlessness, capriciousness, the absence of cumulative achievement in experience, on the personal side, and idle display, parasitic dependence upon the others, on the social side. Occupation is a concrete term for continuity. It includes the development of artistic capacity of any kind, of special scientific ability, of effective citizenship, as well as professional and business occupations, to say nothing of mechanical labor or engagement in gainful pursuits.

We must avoid not only limitation of conception of vocation to the occupations where immediately tangible commodities are produced, but also the notion that vocations are distributed in an exclusive way, one and only one to each person. Such restricted specialism is impossible; nothing could be more absurd than to try to educate individuals with an eye to only one line of activity. In the first place, each individual has of necessity a variety of callings, in each of which he should be intelligently effective; and in the second place any one occupation loses its meaning and becomes a routine keeping busy at something in the degree in which it is isolated from other interests. (i) No one is just an artist and nothing

Democracy and Education

else, and in so far as one approximates that condition, he is so much the less developed human being; he is a kind of monstrosity. He must, at some period of his life, be a member of a family; he must have friends and companions; he must either support himself or be supported by others, and thus he has a business career. He is a member of some organized political unit, and so on. We naturally name his vocation from that one of the callings which distinguishes him, rather than from those which he has in common with all others. But we should not allow ourselves to be so subject to words as to ignore and virtually deny his other callings when it comes to a consideration of the vocational phases of education.

(ii) As a man's vocation as artist is but the emphatically specialized phase of his diverse and variegated vocational activities, so his efficiency in it, in the humane sense of efficiency, is determined by its association with other callings. A person must have experience, he must live, if his artistry is to be more than a technical accomplishment. He cannot find the subject matter of his artistic activity within his art; this must be an expression of what he suffers and enjoys in other relationships - a thing which depends in turn upon the alertness and sympathy of his interests. What is true of an artist is true of any other special calling. There is doubtless - in general accord with the principle of habit - a tendency for every distinctive vocation to become too dominant, too exclusive and absorbing in its specialized aspect. This means emphasis upon skill or technical method at the expense of meaning. Hence it is not the business of education to foster this tendency, but rather to safeguard against it, so that the scientific inquirer shall not be merely the scientist, the teacher merely the pedagogue, the clergyman merely one who wears the cloth, and so on.

2. The Place of Vocational Aims in Education

Bearing in mind the varied and connected content of the vocation, and the broad background upon which a particular calling is projected, we shall now consider education for the more distinctive activity of an individual.

1. An occupation is the only thing which balances the distinctive capacity of an individual with his social service. To find out what one is fitted to do and to secure an opportunity to do it is the key to happiness. Nothing is more tragic than failure to discover one's true business in life, or to find that one has drifted or been forced by circumstance into an uncongenial calling. A right occupation means simply that the aptitudes of a person are in adequate play, working with the minimum of friction and the maximum of satisfaction. With reference to other members of a community, this adequacy of action signifies, of course, that they are getting the best service the person can render. It is generally believed, for example, that slave labor was ultimately wasteful even from the purely economic point of view - that there was not sufficient stimulus to direct the energies of slaves, and that there was consequent wastage. Moreover, since slaves were confined to certain prescribed callings, much talent must have remained unavailable to the community, and hence there was a dead loss. Slavery only illustrates on an obvious scale what happens in some degree whenever an individual does not find himself in his work. And he cannot completely find himself when vocations are looked upon with contempt, and a conventional ideal of a culture

Democracy and Education

which is essentially the same for all is maintained. Plato (ante, p. 88) laid down the fundamental principle of a philosophy of education when he asserted that it was the business of education to discover what each person is good for, and to train him to mastery of that mode of excellence, because such development would also secure the fulfillment of social needs in the most harmonious way. His error was not in qualitative principle, but in his limited conception of the scope of vocations socially needed; a limitation of vision which reacted to obscure his perception of the infinite variety of capacities found in different individuals.

2. An occupation is a continuous activity having a purpose. Education through occupations consequently combines within itself more of the factors conducive to learning than any other method. It calls instincts and habits into play; it is a foe to passive receptivity. It has an end in view; results are to be accomplished. Hence it appeals to thought; it demands that an idea of an end be steadily maintained, so that activity cannot be either routine or capricious. Since the movement of activity must be progressive, leading from one stage to another, observation and ingenuity are required at each stage to overcome obstacles and to discover and readapt means of execution. In short, an occupation, pursued under conditions where the realization of the activity rather than merely the external product is the aim, fulfills the requirements which were laid down earlier in connection with the discussion of aims, interest, and thinking. (See Chapters VIII, X, XII.)

A calling is also of necessity an organizing principle for information and ideas; for knowledge and intellectual growth. It provides an axis which runs through an immense diversity of detail; it causes different experiences, facts, items of information to fall into order with one another. The lawyer, the physician, the laboratory investigator in some branch of chemistry, the parent, the citizen interested in his own locality, has a constant working stimulus to note and relate whatever has to do with his concern. He unconsciously, from the motivation of his occupation, reaches out for all relevant information, and holds to it. The vocation acts as both magnet to attract and as glue to hold. Such organization of knowledge is vital, because it has reference to needs; it is so expressed and readjusted in action that it never becomes stagnant. No classification, no selection and arrangement of facts, which is consciously worked out for purely abstract ends, can ever compare in solidity or effectiveness with that knit under the stress of an occupation; in comparison the former sort is formal, superficial, and cold.

3. The only adequate training for occupations is training through occupations. The principle stated early in this book (see Chapter VI) that the educative process is its own end, and that the only sufficient preparation for later responsibilities comes by making the most of immediately present life, applies in full force to the vocational phases of education. The dominant vocation of all human beings at all times is living - intellectual and moral growth. In childhood and youth, with their relative freedom from economic stress, this fact is naked and unconcealed. To predetermine some future occupation for which education is to be a strict preparation is to injure the possibilities of present development and thereby to reduce the adequacy of preparation for a future right employment. To repeat the principle we have

Democracy and Education

had occasion to appeal to so often, such training may develop a machine-like skill in routine lines (it is far from being sure to do so, since it may develop distaste, aversion, and carelessness), but it will be at the expense of those qualities of alert observation and coherent and ingenious planning which make an occupation intellectually rewarding. In an autocratically managed society, it is often a conscious object to prevent the development of freedom and responsibility, a few do the planning and ordering, the others follow directions and are deliberately confined to narrow and prescribed channels of endeavor. However much such a scheme may inure to the prestige and profit of a class, it is evident that it limits the development of the subject class; hardens and confines the opportunities for learning through experience of the master class, and in both ways hampers the life of the society as a whole. (See ante, p. 260.)

The only alternative is that all the earlier preparation for vocations be indirect rather than direct; namely, through engaging in those active occupations which are indicated by the needs and interests of the pupil at the time. Only in this way can there be on the part of the educator and of the one educated a genuine discovery of personal aptitudes so that the proper choice of a specialized pursuit in later life may be indicated. Moreover, the discovery of capacity and aptitude will be a constant process as long as growth continues. It is a conventional and arbitrary view which assumes that discovery of the work to be chosen for adult life is made once for all at some particular date. One has discovered in himself, say, an interest, intellectual and social, in the things which have to do with engineering and has decided to make that his calling. At most, this only blocks out in outline the field in which further growth is to be directed. It is a sort of rough sketch for use in direction of further activities. It is the discovery of a profession in the sense in which Columbus discovered America when he touched its shores. Future explorations of an indefinitely more detailed and extensive sort remain to be made. When educators conceive vocational guidance as something which leads up to a definitive, irretrievable, and complete choice, both education and the chosen vocation are likely to be rigid, hampering further growth. In so far, the calling chosen will be such as to leave the person concerned in a permanently subordinate position, executing the intelligence of others who have a calling which permits more flexible play and readjustment. And while ordinary usages of language may not justify terming a flexible attitude of readjustment a choice of a new and further calling, it is such in effect. If even adults have to be on the lookout to see that their calling does not shut down on them and fossilize them, educators must certainly be careful that the vocational preparation of youth is such as to engage them in a continuous reorganization of aims and methods.

3. Present Opportunities and Dangers

In the past, education has been much more vocational in fact than in name. (i) The education of the masses was distinctly utilitarian. It was called apprenticeship rather than education, or else just learning from experience. The schools devoted themselves to the three R's in the degree in which ability to go through the forms of reading, writing, and figuring were common elements in all kinds of labor. Taking part in some special line of work, under the direction of others, was the out-of-school phase of this education. The two

Democracy and Education

supplemented each other; the school work in its narrow and formal character was as much a part of apprenticeship to a calling as that explicitly so termed.

(ii) To a considerable extent, the education of the dominant classes was essentially vocational - it only happened that their pursuits of ruling and of enjoying were not called professions. For only those things were named vocations or employments which involved manual labor, laboring for a reward in keep, or its commuted money equivalent, or the rendering of personal services to specific persons. For a long time, for example, the profession of the surgeon and physician ranked almost with that of the valet or barber - partly because it had so much to do with the body, and partly because it involved rendering direct service for pay to some definite person. But if we go behind words, the business of directing social concerns, whether politically or economically, whether in war or peace, is as much a calling as anything else; and where education has not been completely under the thumb of tradition, higher schools in the past have been upon the whole calculated to give preparation for this business. Moreover, display, the adornment of person, the kind of social companionship and entertainment which give prestige, and the spending of money, have been made into definite callings. Unconsciously to themselves the higher institutions of learning have been made to contribute to preparation for these employments. Even at present, what is called higher education is for a certain class (much smaller than it once was) mainly preparation for engaging effectively in these pursuits.

In other respects, it is largely, especially in the most advanced work, training for the calling of teaching and special research. By a peculiar superstition, education which has to do chiefly with preparation for the pursuit of conspicuous idleness, for teaching, and for literary callings, and for leadership, has been regarded as non-vocational and even as peculiarly cultural. The literary training which indirectly fits for authorship, whether of books, newspaper editorials, or magazine articles, is especially subject to this superstition: many a teacher and author writes and argues in behalf of a cultural and humane education against the encroachments of a specialized practical education, without recognizing that his own education, which he calls liberal, has been mainly training for his own particular calling. He has simply got into the habit of regarding his own business as essentially cultural and of overlooking the cultural possibilities of other employments. At the bottom of these distinctions is undoubtedly the tradition which recognizes as employment only those pursuits where one is responsible for his work to a specific employer, rather than to the ultimate employer, the community.

There are, however, obvious causes for the present conscious emphasis upon vocational education - for the disposition to make explicit and deliberate vocational implications previously tacit. (i) In the first place, there is an increased esteem, in democratic communities, of whatever has to do with manual labor, commercial occupations, and the rendering of tangible services to society. In theory, men and women are now expected to do something in return for their support - intellectual and economic - by society. Labor is extolled; service is a much-lauded moral ideal. While there is still much admiration and envy of those who can pursue lives of idle conspicuous display, better moral sentiment condemns

Democracy and Education

such lives. Social responsibility for the use of time and personal capacity is more generally recognized than it used to be.

(ii) In the second place, those vocations which are specifically industrial have gained tremendously in importance in the last century and a half. Manufacturing and commerce are no longer domestic and local, and consequently more or less incidental, but are world-wide. They engage the best energies of an increasingly large number of persons. The manufacturer, banker, and captain of industry have practically displaced a hereditary landed gentry as the immediate directors of social affairs. The problem of social readjustment is openly industrial, having to do with the relations of capital and labor. The great increase in the social importance of conspicuous industrial processes has inevitably brought to the front questions having to do with the relationship of schooling to industrial life. No such vast social readjustment could occur without offering a challenge to an education inherited from different social conditions, and without putting up to education new problems.

(iii) In the third place, there is the fact already repeatedly mentioned: Industry has ceased to be essentially an empirical, rule-of-thumb procedure, handed down by custom. Its technique is now technological: that is to say, based upon machinery resulting from discoveries in mathematics, physics, chemistry, bacteriology, etc. The economic revolution has stimulated science by setting problems for solution, by producing greater intellectual respect for mechanical appliances. And industry received back payment from science with compound interest. As a consequence, industrial occupations have infinitely greater intellectual content and infinitely larger cultural possibilities than they used to possess. The demand for such education as will acquaint workers with the scientific and social bases and bearings of their pursuits becomes imperative, since those who are without it inevitably sink to the role of appendages to the machines they operate. Under the old regime all workers in a craft were approximately equals in their knowledge and outlook. Personal knowledge and ingenuity were developed within at least a narrow range, because work was done with tools under the direct command of the worker. Now the operator has to adjust himself to his machine, instead of his tool to his own purposes. While the intellectual possibilities of industry have multiplied, industrial conditions tend to make industry, for great masses, less of an educative resource than it was in the days of hand production for local markets. The burden of realizing the intellectual possibilities inhering in work is thus thrown back on the school.

(iv) In the fourth place, the pursuit of knowledge has become, in science, more experimental, less dependent upon literary tradition, and less associated with dialectical methods of reasoning, and with symbols. As a result, the subject matter of industrial occupation presents not only more of the content of science than it used to, but greater opportunity for familiarity with the method by which knowledge is made. The ordinary worker in the factory is of course under too immediate economic pressure to have a chance to produce a knowledge like that of the worker in the laboratory. But in schools, association with machines and industrial processes may be had under conditions where the chief

Democracy and Education

conscious concern of the students is insight. The separation of shop and laboratory, where these conditions are fulfilled, is largely conventional, the laboratory having the advantage of permitting the following up of any intellectual interest a problem may suggest; the shop the advantage of emphasizing the social bearings of the scientific principle, as well as, with many pupils, of stimulating a livelier interest.

(v) Finally, the advances which have been made in the psychology of learning in general and of childhood in particular fall into line with the increased importance of industry in life. For modern psychology emphasizes the radical importance of primitive unlearned instincts of exploring, experimentation, and "trying on." It reveals that learning is not the work of something ready-made called mind, but that mind itself is an organization of original capacities into activities having significance. As we have already seen (ante, p. 204), in older pupils work is to educative development of raw native activities what play is for younger pupils. Moreover, the passage from play to work should be gradual, not involving a radical change of attitude but carrying into work the elements of play, plus continuous reorganization in behalf of greater control. The reader will remark that these five points practically resume the main contentions of the previous part of the work. Both practically and philosophically, the key to the present educational situation lies in a gradual reconstruction of school materials and methods so as to utilize various forms of occupation typifying social callings, and to bring out their intellectual and moral content. This reconstruction must relegate purely literary methods - including textbooks - and dialectical methods to the position of necessary auxiliary tools in the intelligent development of consecutive and cumulative activities.

But our discussion has emphasized the fact that this educational reorganization cannot be accomplished by merely trying to give a technical preparation for industries and professions as they now operate, much less by merely reproducing existing industrial conditions in the school. The problem is not that of making the schools an adjunct to manufacture and commerce, but of utilizing the factors of industry to make school life more active, more full of immediate meaning, more connected with out-of-school experience. The problem is not easy of solution. There is a standing danger that education will perpetuate the older traditions for a select few, and effect its adjustment to the newer economic conditions more or less on the basis of acquiescence in the untransformed, unrationalized, and unsocialized phases of our defective industrial regime. Put in concrete terms, there is danger that vocational education will be interpreted in theory and practice as trade education: as a means of securing technical efficiency in specialized future pursuits. Education would then become an instrument of perpetuating unchanged the existing industrial order of society, instead of operating as a means of its transformation. The desired transformation is not difficult to define in a formal way. It signifies a society in which every person shall be occupied in something which makes the lives of others better worth living, and which accordingly makes the ties which bind persons together more perceptible - which breaks down the barriers of distance between them. It denotes a state of affairs in which the interest of each in his work is uncoerced and intelligent: based upon its congeniality to his own aptitudes. It goes without saying that we are far from such a social state; in a literal

Democracy and Education

and quantitative sense, we may never arrive at it. But in principle, the quality of social changes already accomplished lies in this direction. There are more ample resources for its achievement now than ever there have been before. No insuperable obstacles, given the intelligent will for its realization, stand in the way.

Success or failure in its realization depends more upon the adoption of educational methods calculated to effect the change than upon anything else. For the change is essentially a change in the quality of mental disposition - an educative change. This does not mean that we can change character and mind by direct instruction and exhortation, apart from a change in industrial and political conditions. Such a conception contradicts our basic idea that character and mind are attitudes of participative response in social affairs. But it does mean that we may produce in schools a projection in type of the society we should like to realize, and by forming minds in accord with it gradually modify the larger and more recalcitrant features of adult society. Sentimentally, it may seem harsh to say that the greatest evil of the present regime is not found in poverty and in the suffering which it entails, but in the fact that so many persons have callings which make no appeal to them, which are pursued simply for the money reward that accrues. For such callings constantly provoke one to aversion, ill will, and a desire to slight and evade. Neither men's hearts nor their minds are in their work. On the other hand, those who are not only much better off in worldly goods, but who are in excessive, if not monopolistic, control of the activities of the many are shut off from equality and generality of social intercourse. They are stimulated to pursuits of indulgence and display; they try to make up for the distance which separates them from others by the impression of force and superior possession and enjoyment which they can make upon others.

It would be quite possible for a narrowly conceived scheme of vocational education to perpetuate this division in a hardened form. Taking its stand upon a dogma of social predestination, it would assume that some are to continue to be wage earners under economic conditions like the present, and would aim simply to give them what is termed a trade education - that is, greater technical efficiency. Technical proficiency is often sadly lacking, and is surely desirable on all accounts - not merely for the sake of the production of better goods at less cost, but for the greater happiness found in work. For no one cares for what one cannot half do. But there is a great difference between a proficiency limited to immediate work, and a competency extended to insight into its social bearings; between efficiency in carrying out the plans of others and in one forming one's own. At present, intellectual and emotional limitation characterizes both the employing and the employed class. While the latter often have no concern with their occupation beyond the money return it brings, the former's outlook may be confined to profit and power. The latter interest generally involves much greater intellectual initiation and larger survey of conditions. For it involves the direction and combination of a large number of diverse factors, while the interest in wages is restricted to certain direct muscular movements. But none the less there is a limitation of intelligence to technical and non-humane, non-liberal channels, so far as the work does not take in its social bearings. And when the animating motive is desire for private profit or personal power, this limitation is inevitable. In fact, the advantage in

Democracy and Education

immediate social sympathy and humane disposition often lies with the economically unfortunate, who have not experienced the hardening effects of a one-sided control of the affairs of others.

Any scheme for vocational education which takes its point of departure from the industrial regime that now exists, is likely to assume and to perpetuate its divisions and weaknesses, and thus to become an instrument in accomplishing the feudal dogma of social predestination. Those who are in a position to make their wishes good, will demand a liberal, a cultural occupation, and one which fits for directive power the youth in whom they are directly interested. To split the system, and give to others, less fortunately situated, an education conceived mainly as specific trade preparation, is to treat the schools as an agency for transferring the older division of labor and leisure, culture and service, mind and body, directed and directive class, into a society nominally democratic. Such a vocational education inevitably discounts the scientific and historic human connections of the materials and processes dealt with. To include such things in narrow trade education would be to waste time; concern for them would not be "practical." They are reserved for those who have leisure at command - the leisure due to superior economic resources. Such things might even be dangerous to the interests of the controlling class, arousing discontent or ambitions "beyond the station" of those working under the direction of others. But an education which acknowledges the full intellectual and social meaning of a vocation would include instruction in the historic background of present conditions; training in science to give intelligence and initiative in dealing with material and agencies of production; and study of economics, civics, and politics, to bring the future worker into touch with the problems of the day and the various methods proposed for its improvement. Above all, it would train power of readaptation to changing conditions so that future workers would not become blindly subject to a fate imposed upon them. This ideal has to contend not only with the inertia of existing educational traditions, but also with the opposition of those who are entrenched in command of the industrial machinery, and who realize that such an educational system if made general would threaten their ability to use others for their own ends. But this very fact is the presage of a more equitable and enlightened social order, for it gives evidence of the dependence of social reorganization upon educational reconstruction. It is accordingly an encouragement to those believing in a better order to undertake the promotion of a vocational education which does not subject youth to the demands and standards of the present system, but which utilizes its scientific and social factors to develop a courageous intelligence, and to make intelligence practical and executive.

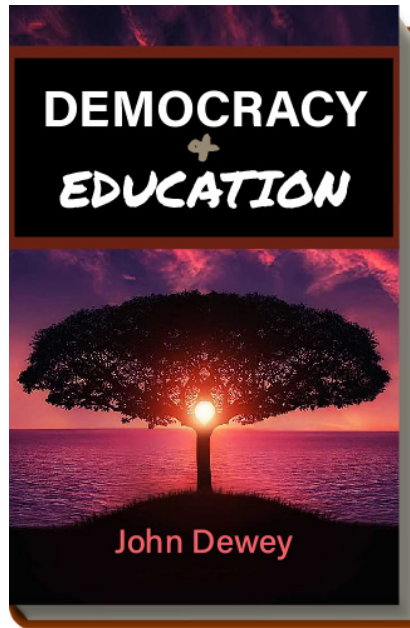
Summary

A vocation signifies any form of continuous activity which renders service to others and engages personal powers in behalf of the accomplishment of results. The question of the relation of vocation to education brings to a focus the various problems previously discussed regarding the connection of thought with bodily activity; of individual conscious development with associated life; of theoretical culture with practical behavior having

Democracy and Education

definite results; of making a livelihood with the worthy enjoyment of leisure. In general, the opposition to recognition of the vocational phases of life in education (except for the utilitarian three R's in elementary schooling) accompanies the conservation of aristocratic ideals of the past. But, at the present juncture, there is a movement in behalf of something called vocational training which, if carried into effect, would harden these ideas into a form adapted to the existing industrial regime. This movement would continue the traditional liberal or cultural education for the few economically able to enjoy it, and would give to the masses a narrow technical trade education for specialized callings, carried on under the control of others. This scheme denotes, of course, simply a perpetuation of the older social division, with its counterpart intellectual and moral dualisms. But it means its continuation under conditions where it has much less justification for existence. For industrial life is now so dependent upon science and so intimately affects all forms of social intercourse, that there is an opportunity to utilize it for development of mind and character. Moreover, a right educational use of it would react upon intelligence and interest so as to modify, in connection with legislation and administration, the socially obnoxious features of the present industrial and commercial order. It would turn the increasing fund of social sympathy to constructive account, instead of leaving it a somewhat blind philanthropic sentiment.

It would give those who engage in industrial callings desire and ability to share in social control, and ability to become masters of their industrial fate. It would enable them to saturate with meaning the technical and mechanical features which are so marked a feature of our machine system of production and distribution. So much for those who now have the poorer economic opportunities. With the representatives of the more privileged portion of the community, it would increase sympathy for labor, create a disposition of mind which can discover the culturing elements in useful activity, and increase a sense of social responsibility. The crucial position of the question of vocational education at present is due, in other words, to the fact that it concentrates in a specific issue two fundamental questions: - Whether intelligence is best exercised apart from or within activity which puts nature to human use, and whether individual culture is best secured under egoistic or social conditions. No discussion of details is undertaken in this chapter, because this conclusion but summarizes the discussion of the previous chapters, XV to XXII, inclusive.



Dewey, J. (2018). *Democracy and Education*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from <http://edtechbooks.org/democracyandeducation>



CC0: This book is in the public domain, which means that you may print, share, or remix its contents as you please without concern for copyright and without seeking permission.

