HUMANIZING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

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Too often a distinction is made between technical and liberal education. Perhaps at the root of this distinction is the notion that ideas and activities are separate categories. This notion assumes that knowledge can be described as a body of ideas and has an independent existence apart from the individual. It also assumes that individuals can be trained to perform complex patterns of behavior by first assimilating atomistic components of the pattern. These assumptions underlie much of the current educational theory as it applies to curriculum planning. Thus, the liberal arts student is presented with ideas from the various disciplines with due regard to scope and sequence, and the vocational education student is taught to perform certain manipulations with tools and equipment relative to a specific occupation. The liberal arts student becomes knowledgeable and the vocational education student becomes skillful. Both of these notions are at fault, for each has a myopic perspective of the student and each separates two inseparable aspects of knowledge—ideation and praxiology. Moreover, these notions carry the implicit assumption that there is a basic distinction between the natures of liberal arts and vocational education students, rather than accepting the idea that the distinction concerns the quality of the interaction which persons have with their situation.

Concerning the propensity to separate knowledge Alfred North Whitehead said, “The antithesis between technical education and liberal education is fallacious... (there can be) no education which does not impart both technique and intellectual vision... the intimate union of theory and practice aid both.” Whitehead appears to support a holistic view of education, as it imparts knowledge to the learner. It is not enough for an individual merely to acquire ideas, he must act upon his situation with the ideas he has come to know. Thus, knowing relates aspects of knowledge. Separation comes only when knowledge is talked about. There is no separation when the individual is engaged with his situation.

A holistic view, then, sees knowledge as being proprietary to the individual. Knowledge has existence only as the individual appropriates it. Polanyi (1964) develops this view. He says that the body is the proximate pole of knowing. Man strives for noetic achievement. This refers to man’s propensity to explore “what is there, an urge to achieve intellectual control over the situations confronting him.” As man experiences his situation he uses his knowledge and he acquires new knowledge. The surgeon’s knowledge becomes apparent through his diagnostic and surgical skills; the toolmaker’s through his technical manipulative skills; and the teacher’s through his process skills. In each instance knowledge has a from-to structure—from the proximate pole or the practitioner to the situation. But the structure is being constantly revised as the individual interacts with the situation.

The main point of this discussion is that both vocational and liberal arts education ought to have the same fundamental curriculum referents. Curriculum developers in vocational education must have concerns about society, about individuals, and about knowledge (ideational and praxiological).

**Perspectives are too limited**

Curriculum planners in vocational education too often restrict their perspectives by their reliance upon a manpower model conception of education. Here the vocational curriculum becomes a transmission device which imparts training to the untrained and moves them into unfilled slots in the occupational structure. The principal source data is the needs of the occupational structure and educational planning becomes reactive. The maws of the machine rather than human values become the controlling force.

That model leaves little room to raise important value issues and to consider consequences. For example, it is doubtful whether the worker’s relation to the work process and to the social organization of the industry is ever contemplated. Is the worker’s task a fragmented and isolated effort which does not appear to have a clear connection to a larger social
purpose? Does the job situation permit the worker to experience a sense of control rather than a sense of being controlled? Can the worker find meaning and purpose in the job as opposed to boredom and futility? Does the job performance require spontaneous interaction or the detachment of an automaton? Those are issues which the curriculum planner for vocational education cannot afford to ignore.

Issues which appear isolated and personal must inevitably reflect larger social issues, for experiencing is an idiosyncratic process.

W.O. Stanley says social issues must be part of the curriculum. "Disorder, confusion, and conflict at the level of fundamentals are salient aspects of the world in which the students of the public school must live. . . . The school would aid its students to achieve a measure of order and clarity through a critical study of confusion and conflict." The larger issues of society are crucial and touch each individual in such a way so as to influence his ability to learn. It is difficult to separate an individual's perceptions of self from his perceptions of society. It is reasonable to suggest, therefore, that an educational system that completely ignores critical social issues is also likely to ignore crucial personal issues. Curriculum planners in vocational education must go beyond their traditional approach of looking at jobs, skills, and knowledge found in the occupational structure; arranging neat training packages in a predetermined scope and sequence; and exposing students to this array. The occupational structure alone cannot be depended upon to provide the essential ingredients for curriculum development.

Other impediments facing curriculum planners for vocational education are the limitations of the technical language they employ and their reliance on an educational theory that is tied to a means-end rationale. The training context for a vocational program is intended to replicate the job context and the behavior of the skilled practitioner becomes the model which the trainee emulates. In this training context the trainee engages himself with the tools, materials, concepts, and practices presumably as the skilled practitioner does.

At the conclusion of the training period the trainee's behavior is assessed by comparing his performance against preconceived objectives, derived from the master practitioner. In many respects, this approach can be visualized as shaping the trainee to conform to a master model. It is apparent that this approach tends to focus rather narrowly on training the trainee to perform a role as it pertains to the job situation. A successfully trained student will fit into the job role and become a means along with tools and materials to fulfill some remote and mysterious end. Here the individual becomes an object that is acted upon by a force outside of him. It is conceivable that this kind of experience can influence the student to perceive himself as being powerless and a victim of forces beyond his control.

In the curriculum development process the student is an anonymous and faceless component, as much of an object as the things he eventually learns to manipulate. Terminal behavior is caused by stimulus treatment, which is shaped by educational objectives expressed in behavioral terms. Other technicalities, such as motives, reinforcement, techniques, transfer of learning, and readiness are studied so as to more efficiently process the learner through the curriculum. There is also the evaluation phase where the learner's behavior is examined, compared to the predetermined objectives, and a determination is made as to whether recycling or passing on is appropriate. As beguiling as the Tyler-Mager system seems to be in its simplicity, it must not be relied upon entirely to shape the curriculum development process. This system focuses too narrowly upon one specific role of the learner, namely how the learner should interact with a carburetor. Other important human roles brought to the work situation are ignored. Roles can never be defined as rigidly and as narrowly as proponents of this kind of educational system would like to believe.

Thus far manpower and vocational education metaphors have been employed in talking about vocational education. There are also political and economic ones. Curriculum considerations often reflect the pressures of labor unions, business and industrial organizations, and community groups via occupational or general advisory councils. While these councils frequently provide valuable information about new processes and materials, they also talk about "good work habits" and "desirable attitudes" as being extrinsically desirable, like a clean coverall. The economic metaphor sees the successful vocational program as producing a salable product. The product of the program is given salable entry-level skills. Under the general heading of accountability, cost/benefit and cost/effective concepts are introduced as a means of quantifying the value added to the product as a result of being exposed to the vocational curriculum. In this connection accountability and quality control are somewhat synonymous, for the end is a reliable and salable product. In a value hierarchy efficiency takes precedence.

The considerations discussed have been rather
severely dealt with. Actually, the intent is not to deny their importance. Manpower data, behavioral objectives, task analysis, accountability, and advisory councils each make a significant contribution to the curriculum development process. The point being made is that the language and concepts derived from these areas are too restrictive for the curriculum planner and serve to narrow the planner’s conceptualization of the curriculum development process. For example, in the lexicon of economics or behavioral psychology there is little opportunity for the planner to talk about human values. Thus, the concepts of behavioral objectives and program efficiency can apply as well to the processing of a student through the curriculum as a human being through Hitler’s gas chambers. When efficiency and objectivity become values unto themselves, little room is left for horror. It is apparent that the curriculum planner for vocational education must search additional areas for metaphoric sources. He must begin to conceptualize the curriculum in terms of human values. Most of all, the curriculum planner must come to understand that the absence of a conscious consideration of human values does not mean that these values are not being thought about. On the contrary, the denial of human values is to accept another value, namely man is of no worth, at least not enough to be concerned about.

**Other Alternatives for the Curriculum Planner**

Some will suggest that the curriculum planner always interacts with other persons as he designs the curriculum. Because of this interaction process values are taken care of, albeit tacitly, and will influence the curriculum. So why make a special point of talking about values? Everyone claims expertise in a particular realm, i.e., psychology, education, and economics; but, no one can claim to be the expert in the realm of values. Here everyone is his own expert, the student and the teacher are on par. Unfortunately, the specialist having high status by virtue of advanced degrees and special knowledge may presume that he knows what is best for other persons. Thus, a teacher believes he knows what is best for his students, the urban planner for the disenchanted urban dweller, and the psychologist for his patients. The curriculum planner for vocational education must also be included in this discussion. This unfortunate condition amongst members of the helping professions comes about mainly because values are not openly discussed. It is strongly suggested that there is a need for other metaphors to think with and to talk about so that values can be dealt with openly.

Such metaphors can come from the arts, religion, cultural anthropology, sociology, and philosophy. As an example, J.W. Krutch (1970) says, “The humanities...include every sort of consideration of the human concerns which cannot be measured—such as, right or wrong, the ugly and the beautiful, the nature of happiness, the characteristics of the good life—all of which...are seen to be the things with which men are more immediately concerned than with the facts established by science.” He adds further, “...science cannot make the value judgements and therefore can tell us only what can be done, never what we ought to do.” What ought to be done is rooted in conviction. Conviction is the driving force of all creative effort and seems to be a disposition that is peculiar to the humanities. One seldom hears talk of a curriculum as being good or bad because of its freeing or subjugating influence upon students. On the other hand, it is common to hear talk of paintings, music, literature as being good or bad for such reasons. Are curriculum developers possessed of particularly fragile egos, or are curriculum designs considered uncreative and therefore only able to be evaluated “scientifically.” It is suggested that neither is the case. Vocational educators need to develop a normative language and to learn to use it comfortably.

It is widely presumed that morals and ethics have little influence on the curriculum. Nothing can be further from the truth. Just because morals and ethics are not discussed in connection with the curriculum, it does not follow that the curriculum is value-free. All education is an attempt by men to influence other men. Whenever a student is asked to have faith in the judgement of his teacher, that student is being told what is good for him. Being moral is taken to mean respecting the integrity and sanctity of the individual. Translating this meaning into the curriculum means establishing a learning situation in which each individual can achieve a sense of personal freedom that will permit him to become whatever he desires to become. From this standpoint, most vocational curricula are immoral, since they seek to shape the individual to fit preconceived occupational patterns. In a neatly contrived curriculum package it is unlikely that there would be room for the student to question the justness of a particular task, as the task relates to his personal interest and growth. It is equally unlikely that a relationship between student and instructor would be characterized as vital or authentic.

Job or task analysis traditionally has been used to identify the minutiae of the vocational curriculum.
Here it is assumed that manipulative and conceptual standards relative to an occupation might be derived by observing a skilled practitioner at work. The problem with this approach is that the curriculum specialist or the instructor observe just that which is apparent and then record the observations. But, in the recording process characteristics of the situation are abstracted to the extent that the skilled practitioner becomes an object described as moving in a very narrow role. Subsequently, the learner becomes an object operating in an equally narrow role as he moves through the curriculum. Criticism is directed more at the scope of the process than at the intent.

Another approach which is infinitely broader in scope may be borrowed from the field of sociology, namely role theory as described by Parsons (1951) and Allport (1964). Here the focus would be molar rather than atomistic. In the process vocational educators might gain some understanding of social alienation, a problem which besets them as well as all educators. Edward Schaffer (1970) develops the theme that alienation is an unavoidable consequence of social existence, because roles as well as institutions tend toward reification. Peter Berger (1966) says that the sector of self-consciousness that has been objectified in the role is then also apprehended as an inevitable fate, for which the individual may disclaim responsibility. Writing about the nature of the role content which is subject to reification, Garfinkel (1967 and Schutz (1967) say common sense knowledge of social institutions refers to the socially sanctioned grounds of inference and action that people use in their everyday affairs and which they assume others use in the same way. This knowledge directs social interaction between members of the family, social club, the work situation, etc.

Role analysis, rather than the traditional job analysis would appropriately describe the human situation as the human encounters his reality. Here, the possibility for the student to develop a highly personal dialog with ideas, things, and others has not been removed. This would be a valuable opportunity for the student to realize his uniqueness through the creative shaping of self and environment. A predetermined objective would not need to interfere with the student's transaction. Such experience would create a new awareness for the student which would be virtually impossible to predict prior to the experience.

Conclusion

An attempt has been made to suggest additional alternatives for the vocational education curriculum planner and not to discount his traditional approaches. The opportunity for introducing new dimensions, as well as new intentions, is present, particularly in the community colleges. In the community colleges the vocational educator, joined with his colleagues in the humanities and in the social sciences, has the opportunity to enlarge his perspectives and to consider alternative ways of thinking about the curriculum. He need only remain open to collaboration.

References


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