

Dewey and the New “Vocationalism”

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INTRODUCTION

Scare quotes have been placed around “vocationalism” because, whilst it might be thought that we are entering a new age of vocationalism in education, it will be argued that we are not, at least if we understand the issue in a traditional manner in which vocational education is to be defined against a liberal-arts-humane education. This is no longer the case for we are entering a total education and training culture in which the vocational, and business values, so permeate the culture that “vocationalism” has little or no meaning for there is no *other* in the educational realm of discourse to define it against.

Arthur Wirth puts the traditional liberal-vocational issue on schooling quite bluntly: “the choice...is whether schools are to become servants of technocratic efficiency needs, or whether they can act to help men and women humanize life under technology.”¹ If it were ever the choice, for schooling has always had a strong vocational element, it is not quite the choice now, because there are not two things to choose between, but only one. The dilemma for families and schools which raised the choice issue historically is stated firmly by Corson:

the workplace has become separated from the home; occupational roles have become distinct from kin based roles and relationships; labor market values have penetrated into family decisions about the future of offspring; parents have come to see that children’s job prospects are far removed from any form of socialization that they can possibly receive within the family and parents are not usually placed to make the social connections necessary to put their children in touch with work that might suit and satisfy their wants and talents.²

In this passage Corson is making a case for the necessity of an education, but on vocational grounds. But what were working class families to do? Choose a bookish elitist education that *might* lead to a leisured and safe life, perhaps to the professions, or opt for an education that would guarantee a vocation and perhaps security, if not happiness.

Bertrand Russell believed this distinction to be mistaken. He argued³ that education had always had a vocational element, and that the distinction between the ornamental and the useful in education was spurious. But he also believed that education was best served by the development of creative powers through rigorous study in the disciplines. Dewey also believed the distinction to be spurious, but for different reasons.⁴ Because Dewey argued for the importance of technology, and because in this new vocationalism we are entering what can be called the mode of information,⁵ we will look at how he attempted to collapse this dualism and “harness” technology for the development of intellect, whilst at the same time dismissing the view that we should become servants of technocratic efficiency needs.

First we will look at the views of John Dewey on the role of schools and how he believed they could be democratically restructured so that through technology the world of work could be transformed. Second we will look at this new vocationalism,

particularly at the notion of the autonomous chooser, assess the appropriateness of Dewey's position in the last decade of the twentieth century, and why it may no longer be appropriate to talk of vocationalism in education. Finally I make some comments on what might be an appropriate form of (critical) theory for the consideration of these issues.

DEWEY ON VOCATIONALISM

According to Dewey: "The demands of an industrialized and technological society cannot be ignored."⁶ How those demands were to be met was another matter, as he resisted narrow versions of vocationalism most strongly. But, as the context in which his arguments were formulated has changed, this raises questions as to their applicability to the new context. The new arguments which are required must take a different form, and one which is "on line" with the new technological and information society.

Like Dewey I believe that there must be some relationship between education and the world of work. However he sees the relationship as being necessary, and in a stronger sense than Corson (above):

there is the necessity that these immature members (of society) be not merely physically preserved in adequate numbers, but that they be initiated into the interests, purposes, information, skill and practices of the mature members: otherwise the group will cease its characteristic life (author's enclosure).⁷

Schools are necessary for this education to take place, Dewey argues, because of the complexity of modern life. He is proposing therefore a strong, or causally necessary connection between education and schooling, and the social world, including the world of work.

Dewey saw the antithesis between liberal-humanistic education and vocational education as an outcome of a number of several other closely aligned dualisms.⁸ According to him these dualisms were "deeply entangled...with the whole subject of vocational education,"⁹ and had to be collapsed.

Whilst Dewey accepted the need for the reform of schools and was part of a general reform movement, he parted company quite strongly with an element in that "movement" which was advocating a strong vocational element, including separate vocational schools.¹⁰ Dewey's opposition to separate vocational schools was both social and political as well as educational:

The kind of education which I am interested in is not one which will adapt workers to the existing industrial regime; I am not sufficiently in love with the regime for that. It seems to me that the business of all who would not be educational time servers is to strive for a kind of vocational education which will first alter the existing industrial system, and ultimately transform it.¹¹

He believed that the right *occupation* was the key to human happiness,¹² and that this was not something that one could be adapted to, or drafted into like a slave. Given that a person could find out "what one was fitted to do" then:

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...Hence it appeals to thought; it demands that an idea of an end in view be steadily maintained so that activity cannot be either routine or capricious...the only adequate training *for* occupations is training *through* occupations.¹³

If the most efficacious learning was to take place *in* occupations schools, as then constituted, could not easily provide the technology of the workplace. Dewey saw the most advanced technology as exemplifying the most advanced *problem* solving of the day, and that the young could be introduced to this technology without either *preparing* them for a future occupation or *adapting* them to the world of work. But how were the young to be “introduced” to a workplace which they were meant to be able to transform?

At best, he believed, one can only have a sketch for use in future directions, or an outline of the field in which further growth is to be directed, as one cannot prepare in a determinate way for a future which can only be indeterminate. If a rigid education which hampers growth is to be avoided, preparations for vocations can only be *indirect* rather than direct, Dewey argues. If not, people will be left: “in a permanently subordinate position, executing the intelligence of others who have a calling which permits more flexible play and readjustment.”¹⁴ What can schools do then? Here, as elsewhere in Dewey, problem solving and scientific method (the theory of inquiry¹⁵) have much of the burden to carry. Dewey believed that technology had increased the intellectual and educational possibilities of industry, whilst at the same time the industrial conditions of work had narrowed the educative potential of the workplace.¹⁶ The intellectual possibilities and educative potentiality of industry had been enhanced by technology which represented for Dewey, problem solving at its most advanced intellectual state. Because the conditions of industrial work had been narrowed the “burden of realizing the intellectual possibilities inherent in work is thus thrown back on the school.”¹⁷ It was the school then that would have to provide, through the reconstruction of the educative experiences of the young “in” technology, the transformation(s) needed in the world of work.

For Dewey this required the gradual reconstruction of school methods and materials so as to utilize the best of modern technology and the problem solving potential inherent in educational activities associated with that technology. This was not to make the schools an adjunct of industry and commerce and to acquiesce in the “untransformed, unrationalized and unsocialized phases of our defective industrial regime” but, of utilizing the intellectual problem solving potential inherent in modern technology, “to make school life more active, more full of meaning, more connected with out of school experience.”¹⁸

This was not then to give the young a mere technical proficiency which would promote technical efficiency in the carrying out of the plans of others but, rather a *competency* which extended insight into its social bearings and permitted an efficiency in formulating and carrying out one’s own plans. The transformed industrial and social order would have been, for Dewey:

a society in which every person shall be occupied in something which makes the lives of others worth living, and which makes the ties which bind people together more perceptible...It denotes a state of affairs in which the interest of each in his work is uncoerced and intelligent...¹⁹

Another concern of Dewey was that a narrowly conceived approach to vocational education would perpetuate social divisions and in a hardened form, for both the employers and the employees would be intellectually limited. This could leave

the employer class confined to issues of profit and power, and the employee class concerned only with monetary return from their labor. This would involve a limitation of intelligence to "technical and non-humane, non-liberal channels."²⁰

Dewey's solution then is to reject the dualism between the liberal-humane and the vocational. Properly conceived the liberal-humane and the vocational merge through the rational problem solving of technology. The autonomous person must choose a form of vocational education, but it was a form in which rationality was writ large in the advanced problem solving potential of modern technology. To put it another way, faced with a question similar to Wirth's opening question above, namely, should I pursue a liberal arts curriculum or a vocational curriculum, there can be no answer. There can only be one meaningful option — that of the vocational curriculum as envisaged by Dewey, where the canons of rationality are deeply embedded in the problem solving and rational potential of the most advanced technology.

Dewey's answer to Wirth's question is therefore that technology can be used for liberal-humane aims, but that this requires a certain approach to technology and the transformation of the industrial conditions of the world of work where technology is housed so as to promote its educative potential. So the dualism is collapsed.

THE RETURN TO VOCATIONALISM

For almost two decades in New Zealand and elsewhere²¹ (see for example, Wringe, 1981) public attention has been focused on unemployment, especially youth unemployment. But in relation to youth unemployment in particular, it became possible in New Zealand in the 1980s to refocus this attention and agitation, away from economic factors and the restructuring of the industrial, economic, and welfare sectors, onto education and training, and the skilling of young New Zealanders for the economic and technological challenges ahead. This may have been, however, to shift the issue from a structural economic and national problem to an individualistic and personalized problem, so that young people came to be "seen" to be unemployed because they do not have the right skills and qualifications. In order to effect these changes it was claimed, though not always argued, that public education should be more vocationally oriented.

In New Zealand the dominant educational ideology since the Fourth Labour Government of 1984 has been that schools should prepare people for the world of work, particularly in the new technology that will take such a prominent role in the new mode of information. The liberal-humane ideology of the preceding fifty years was replaced in public documents on education first, by an emphasis on a vocationally oriented careers education²² and, second, by a later neo-liberal view of self serving individuals, or autonomous choosers, pursuing economic rewards in the world of work and the new age of information, via an education which is explicitly vocationally and technologically oriented.²³ Education is no longer justified intrinsically as a thing which is a good in itself, if it ever was,²⁴ but extrinsically and instrumentally, by what it leads to in the world of work.

In the National Curriculum Framework knowledge and understanding have been replaced by information, knowing content by learning processes and getting

skilled (especially on modern information technology), attitudes and values towards knowledge replaced with attitudes and values associated with learning processes, and quality and truth in education by consumer notions of satisfaction. The National Curriculum Framework is no longer subject based.²⁵

Technology had been a major cause of the pressure for vocationalism in the United States in the 1890s²⁶ and it might be tempting to see this thrust towards vocationalism in a similar manner, though with new demands for computer literacy and electronic communication in the mode of information.

Dewey's point was that such an education, an education which did not provide knowledge and understanding as he defined them) would restrict growth and leave those without knowledge in "a permanently subordinate position, executing the intelligence of others." The young have a right to expect more than that in their education.

A notion of the self which underlies the reform literatures is that of the (neo-liberal) autonomous chooser. However the autonomous chooser is not the Enlightenment notion of the free autonomous individual. Just as Michel Foucault has argued that the latter individual is not free,²⁷ nor will neo-liberal autonomous choosers be free either, as busnocratic rationality and busno-power²⁸ will shape them as particular kinds of subjects so that they will choose in certain general ways.

Busnower is similar to bio-power and does not replace it. Rather it should be seen as an adjunct or as complementary. Foucault had introduced the term "bio-power" as follows:

The disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population constituted the two poles around which the organization of power over life was deployed. The setting up, in the course of the classical age, of this great bipolar technology — anatomic and biological, individualizing and specifying, directed towards the performances of the body, with attention to the processes of life — characterized a power whose highest function was perhaps no longer to kill, but to invest life through and through.²⁹

Biopower is exercised on the body, carries a specifically anatomical and biological aspect, and is exercised over individuals as members of a population, first so that their sexuality and individuality are constituted in certain ways but, second, so that this connects with issues of national policy. Thereby docile and healthy bodies can be inserted into the machinery of production so that populations can be adjusted in accordance with economic processes. Foucault discusses in considerable detail how the requisite techniques and technologies for the exercise of bio-power were developed.

Biopower acts on the self to change the self not merely into a continuous chooser but a chooser who chooses between a range of vocational educational options. Like bio-power it is another form of population control. But there is not space to develop these ideas here.

In the reform literatures students, parents, and so forth are presumed to be persons not merely capable of deliberating upon alternatives, and choosing between alternative educational programs according to individual needs and interests, and the qualities of programs, but it seems to be presumed that it is part of the very nature

of being human to both make, and want to make, *continuous* consumer style choices. But the notions of autonomy needed to make choices, and the notions of needs and interests, presuppose that such choices are the student's (or chooser's) *own*, that *as choosers* they are *independent*, and that needs and interests have not been manipulated or imposed in some way upon them.

But in the new world of vocationalism truth and quality are determined in accordance with business values — it is the consumers who determine quality/truth. But what is being offered to choice is a range of educational choices imbued with business values. Therefore the choices open to the autonomous chooser will themselves be determined by business values. What counts as an educational choice and a life style choice will be between options the quality of which has been determined by business values. In other words through busno-power business notions of quality and a form of vocationalism will infuse all educational options and hence educational choices.

It is not just that the individual should become an autonomous chooser in education and through education but also that this connects with wider government policy and economic theory. Here busno-power produces autonomous choosers as units in an enterprise and consumer driven market totality. It would be tempting to interpret this state of affairs in accordance with the first of the options presented by Wirth — as schools becoming the servants of technocratic efficiency needs. We could then go along with Dewey's early attacks on narrow forms of vocationalism. Thus the reforms would be seen as attempts to adapt people to an unrationalized workplace, as viewing individuals as possessing varying capacities and potentials which could be identified and maximized to fit into the demands of an increasingly technological world of work. Justice would not be served by merely providing opportunity and a differentiated skills program according to identified abilities and careful counselling, and permitting market forces to sort things out. Indeed such criticisms can be found in many of the responses to the changes that have occurred in New Zealand education. But that is not quite sufficient.

Dewey did not see the individual as being isolated and making "autonomous" choices quite as the literature on the autonomous chooser envisages. For Dewey the individual was an outcome of both the patternings of the culture and the individual choices made in accordance with the value positions held by the individual. Of course some of these values would have been the outcome of the patternings of the culture. But what is presupposed in Dewey's solution to transform the school, to enhance the educational possibilities through the problem solving possibilities of technology and thereby the workplace and the culture, is the notion of individuals able to choose freely, to recognize the problem solving and educational possibilities of technology and the ways in which this could ultimately transform the world of work and the culture. Educational choice in the old vocationalism was presented and argued as being between an elitist and high culture education and the vocationalism necessary for the less able majority. But these were presented as options.

My point is that the autonomous chooser will not be able to choose in the way envisaged by Dewey, because the range of values presented to the autonomous

chooser has become vocational throughout. The autonomous chooser is a new kind of individual or self, cut off from educational liberal values, for both the culture and the values of individuals have been penetrated and transformed so that Dewey's vision choice on rational grounds of the technological education is replaced by a choice between vocational alternatives. Thus the means of the intelligent transformation of the work place seem to be precluded.

Dewey was concerned that education must take place in democratic structures if people are to come to believe in and to commit themselves to democratic practices and procedures. However the industrialized work place did not adhere to such structures, producing individuals who espoused democratic principles but whose lived experience was different. This produced considerable dissonance for individuals and society. But in the new culture this dissonance will be collapsed as the values of the world of work merge in the new education and training culture.

An attempt to change the New Zealand culture seems well on track. This is not merely a change in education but a total change in culture. It involves a penetration into the patternings of culture that structure the individual and the very values which it may become possible for individuals to hold. The autonomous chooser is an individual who will hold only a certain range of values associated with consumer values. The importance of this change in culture was clearly recognized by the former Chief Executive Officer of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority when he stated: "The big challenge is to change entrenched attitudes and establish an education and training culture."³⁰ Efforts to change this culture have run in parallel with the ideology of freedom and consumer choice that has permeated the educational literature since 1988. As Diorio has pointed out³¹ efforts to change attitudes, skills, and educational policy particularly through schooling become a form of population policy. Embedded deep in this population policy is the autonomous chooser but it is clearly not the autonomous person of Enlightenment thought. If we take that earlier notion seriously as an aim of education we cannot presume to direct the outcomes that we desire, or the attitudes and values that the young should hold. Thus the continual exhortations on public media by a variety of government agencies, to get skilled and trained, must be seen as directional and incompatible with personal autonomy. If we take personal autonomy seriously then as Diorio puts it: "we would be unable to presume that in order to count as a rational and autonomous adult a young person must value regular employment or training over a life in which either or both of these were lacking."³² The autonomous chooser of the educational literature is presumed to have made the choices of the educational and training culture and to have accepted the cultural values implicit in such a choice. Hood has correctly grasped the centrality of the task facing the new vocationalism.

CONCLUSION

It would be destructive to interpret the above in any fatalistic or deterministic fashion, for what has been provided is a conceptual framework which underlies recent reforms, and because it is a conceptual framework, can merely indicate the empirical possibilities. It would also be a mistake to interpret these reforms in a simplistic left-right fashion as the New Zealand Business Round Table is expressing

concerns about quality, and constructivism in science education, for example, which are not incompatible with liberal-left critiques of the vocationalism inherent in the reforms.

Dewey directed his critique at the technology. But we need to look at the new technology of electronic writing, not as an initiation into problem solving in Dewey's manner, but for the *outcomes* of the technology in the age of information. The form of education that the new vocationalists envisage in the age of information is essentially a vocational development of what has preceded, as *extensions* of the world of print, and printed file storage of data, though involving different emphases on knowledge and understanding. In general the "advance" of electronic communication and the move from the printed word to electronic language is treated as being unproblematic in the new vocationalism.

If Foucault is correct, what is needed in response to neo-liberalism (and this new vocationalism) is an increased vigilance, and an increased imagination and inventiveness, for there is a complex problem space brought into play by such neo-liberal reforms.³³ We need, at the least, some form of critical social theory and some definition of critical theory which is not narrowly exclusive.

Here we can profitably turn to Poster:

Critical theory, as defined long ago by Max Horkheimer, attempts to promote the subject of emancipation by furthering what it understands as the theoretical effort of the critique of domination begun by the Enlightenment and continued by Karl Marx.³⁴

If we are to avoid domination we need to apply a form of critical theory along the lines given in Poster's definition to these demands of the new vocationalism and electronic writing. It would need to consider the following at the least: the philosophical move from knowledge to information and the implications for critique of information when, in electronic writing, knowledge is built into the hardware and software; the authority of the author in electronic writing; new forms of subjectivity; and the forms of power inherent in electronic writing where bodies are scarcely needed for power to be exercised or resisted.³⁵

Important as Dewey's arguments were against narrow forms of vocationalism they were predicated upon different assumptions and it is far from obvious that they are still applicable in the last decade of the twentieth century.

1. Arthur Wirth, "Issues in the Vocational-Liberal Studies Controversy (1900-1917): John Dewey vs the Social Efficiency Philosophers," in *Education for Work*, ed. David Corson (Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1988), 55.

2. Corson, *Education for Work*, 12.

3. Bertrand Russell, *On Education* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1926), chap. 1.

4. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: MacMillan, 1916) chap. 22.

5. I am fully indebted for my discussion of the mode of information to the writings of Mark Poster, *The Mode of Information* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

6. John Dewey, "The Need for Orientation," in John Dewey, *Philosophy of Education* (New York: Littleman Adams, 1958), 89.

7. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 2

8. Ibid., 306.
9. Ibid.
10. Wirth, "Issues in the Vocational-Liberal Studies Controversy," 60.
11. Dewey, "Education vs Trade Training: Dr. Dewey's Reply," *The New Republic*, 15 May 1915, 42.
12. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 308.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1938).
16. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 314.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 316.
20. Ibid., 318.
21. G.A. Wringe, "Education, Schooling and the World of Work," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 29, no. 10 (1981): 123-37.
22. W.L. Renwick, "Education and Working Life," *New Zealand Post Primary Teachers Association Journal*, Term 1 (1981): 5-14.
23. Ministry of Education, *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (Wellington: Learning Media, 1993).
24. Joseph Diorio, "Instrumentalism, Instruction, and Transition Education," in *Transition: Perspectives on School-to-work in New Zealand*, ed. Wanda Korndorffer (Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1987), 91-115.
25. James D. Marshall, "Foucault and Neo-Liberalism: Biopower and Busnopower," in *Philosophy of Education 1994*, ed. Alven Neiman (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1995), 320-29 and James D. Marshall, "Skills, Information and Quality for the Autonomous Chooser," in *Education, Democracy, and Reforms*, eds. Mark Olssen and Kay Morris Matthews (Auckland: New Zealand Association for Research in Education/Research Unit in Maori Education, the University of Auckland, Monograph, 1995b), 45-60.
26. Wirth, "Issues in the Vocational-Liberal Studies Controversy," 55.
27. James D. Marshall, *Michel Foucault: Personal Autonomy and Education* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1996c).
28. See f.n. 25.
29. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I (New York: Pantheon, 1980).
30. David Hood, *Learn* 1 (1994), 40.
31. Diorio, "Instrumentalism, Instruction, and Transition Education," 95.
32. Ibid., 112.
33. Colin Gordon, "Introduction," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 1-51.
34. Mark Poster, *Critical Theory and Poststructuralism: in Search of a Context* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 1.
35. See James D. Marshall, "Critical Theory, the Mode of Information and Education: Insights from Foucault," in *Critical Theory in Educational Discourse*, ed. Tom Popkewitz (Durban: Heinemann, 1997).