
DEWEY ON EDUCATING VOCATION:
BRINGING ADULT LEARNING TO THE UNIVERSITY

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I would like to address Dewey's complex notion of vocation—particularly his idea of multiple vocational activities—and relate it to educating for vocation in colleges and universities. I argue that higher educators can *best* respect a student's autonomy as a chooser—with multiple potential vocations—by giving him or her multiple “selections of reality” to reflect upon. In this paper, I first evoke some common sense understandings of vocation as an interlude to Dewey's discussion of multiple vocational activities in *Democracy and Education*. Then, I discuss what I call the “problem of adult learning” and the difficulty it poses for introducing a wider view of vocation to undergraduates as emerging adults. Finally, I consider some strategies for introducing Dewey's concept of multiple vocational activities into the university curriculum.

The issue of how liberal and vocational elements should be related in higher education continues to be raised by leading philosophers of higher education.¹ In a recent essay, Amy Gutmann addressed the relation of liberal education and professional education in selective colleges and universities, and particularly the continued pejorative associations with the term “vocational.” In her essay, Gutmann argues that in order for higher education to satisfy its three primary aims regarding the education of its students, which she refers to as “opportunity,” “creative understanding,” and “contribution,” every undergraduate student, irrespective of major, should be “taught to think deeply and systematically about the social roles and responsibilities of the professions and professionals” because of the eminent public nature of the questions the professions address.² Thus, colleges and universities must not attempt to impose a political or ideological separation between liberal education and professional education, but rather a fluid, interrelated partnership. One consequence of the “separation” thesis is that colleges and universities make the assumption that students will develop understandings of the social roles and responsibilities of the professions somewhere else, later on down the road—when they become teachers, doctors, lawyers, or engineers. A more likely outcome, however, is that

¹ For discussion of how these seemingly opposed elements are related, see particularly Kathleen Knight Abowitz, “The Interdependency of Vocational and Liberal Aims in Higher Education,” *About Campus* May-June (2006): 16–22.

² Amy Gutmann, “What Makes a University Education Worthwhile?” in *The Aims of Higher Education*, eds. Harry Brighouse and Michael McPherson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 16.

newly minted professionals will become easily swayed into uncritically accepting the image their chosen profession presents of itself.

John Dewey all too clearly recognized this problem when he wrote that educational institutions should seek to *transform* industrial society rather than slavishly follow its lead—and this depends, most of all, on how we approach the pedagogy of vocational education. Vocational education, for Dewey, should be an “education which acknowledges the full intellectual and social meaning of a vocation . . . 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.”³

Before we consider the relation of Dewey’s ideas to this perennial debate, we need to consider the concept of vocation.

FINDING A VOCATION OR MULTIPLE VOCATIONAL ACTIVITIES?

Many questions swirl around this topic. A few are: What does it mean to have *a* vocation? What constitutes a vocation? Can you develop a “sense” or “understanding” of vocation, and if so, how? What is a vocation *for*—the individual person or the surrounding society? In common speech, the notion of vocation is used in different, sometimes conflicting ways. In the sense of a professional career path, we tend to refer to those people who seem to have found *a* vocation for something they are best “suited” for—through a combination of lucky circumstance or opportunity, “being in the right place at the right time,” and the ability to build upon an initial aptitude and interest in something through dedication and hard work. In a deeper, more holistic sense, we also refer to those who have discovered a “calling” for something, which becomes their life’s purpose. Whenever we are asked about why and how we came to do what we are doing, our reminiscences are littered with references to vocation, even if we never use that word. Retroactively, the notion of vocation helps us to connect the past with our present and future plans, giving a semblance of order and logic to our choices.

Quoted below is an excerpt of a recent interview I conducted with Tim, an upper-level administrator in international education, about how he arrived at his current position:

I came to the university as a PhD student in 1990 in the field of . . . ethnomusicology, so my research interests took me first to Spain and then to Japan for somewhat extended periods of time. I was working in Spain, on Spanish 16th century instrumental music, so that was mostly archival research. In Japan, I was working on early 20th century and late 19th century instrumental music but also . . . interviewing performers that were performing on traditional instruments . . . in

³ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916), 372.

contemporary contexts. So I had some travel experience, some language aptitude. The previous director of the International office [learned about me] . . . her husband was one of my advisors. She started by recruiting me to work for her in the summers with some Japanese student groups that were coming in—she wanted somebody who could speak with them, give them general orientation about the community, but also teach a course on American popular culture and diversity in popular culture as expressed through music and film and things like that. So that was fun—when her full-time person left she offered to give me the position as her assistant director. I sort of walked into it from there . . . the job market for ethnomusicologists has always been bad but it was particularly bad during that time, in the late 90's. . . . As I got into this job, I found that this particular niche of learning how institutions as a whole interact with one another and figuring out how to improve that [communication] to the benefit of both partners . . . just became a sort of personal interest and fascination of mine and that's where my professional development in that direction has gone.⁴

This story nicely illustrates one way of how we experience coming to understand our vocation: it does not represent a single decision made, at one point in time, to pursue a particular job or career path. Rather, it represents a seemingly disparate series of activities and wrong turns that eventually lead to a discovery of sorts, the “Ah ha!” moment. Through engaging in his new occupation, Tim learned that he not only had a vocation for cultural negotiation, but that he had been developing this vocation all along without realizing it. Thus, for Tim, an understanding of vocation came *after* and *through* life experiences and career-related activities that, after a sort of crisis, necessitated a search for an underlying logic or coherence behind the choices he had made.

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey clearly distinguishes between vocations and occupations. According to Dewey, “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.”⁵ Vocations are, in other words, expressions of our basic human curiosity and desire to know, and thus are always multiple, rejuvenating, and diversifying throughout our lives. This may be why Dewey likens human beings’ pursuit of vocation to that of artistic creation. Like the work of an artist, we transform different life experiences into the raw material for future choices and projects. These different life experiences represent different types of *callings*, which through education and our own agency may develop into “diverse and

⁴ Tim Barnes (administrator) in discussion with the author, April 2014.

⁵ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 358–59.

variegated vocational activities.”⁶ An occupation, on the other hand, is a form of concrete activity—a term Dewey seems to prefer to “job,” “profession” or “career.” While having an occupation, for Dewey, is a necessary requirement for democratic citizenship and fulfills social needs and business interests, he makes it clear that a full human being—understood as possessing multiple vocations—must not be reduced to any single occupation. Occupations don’t take the person in all their diversity into account; they become fixed, routinized, and should be shed in the interest of preserving our vocational autonomy.

For higher education today, as in Dewey’s day, vocations and occupations are often taken to amount to the same thing—effectively reduced to preparing students for a static conception of employment and the job market. In the process, the full moral and intellectual import of vocational education is lost. Opposing conventional educational wisdom about the search for *a* vocation, Dewey noted that “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.”⁷ Following his example, we should distinguish between *a* vocation—typically understood as a job or profession—and multiple vocational activities that we pursue in the interest of creative self-understanding and fulfillment. What does Dewey’s notion of multiple vocational activities mean for the educative tasks of the modern liberal university? The immediate issue we encounter is how much more complex the “idea” of the university is, and its relation to society and commerce, than it was in Dewey’s day.

THE PROBLEM OF ADULT LEARNING FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

What I call the “problem of adult learning” poses both a conceptual and practical challenge for the consideration of vocational education in colleges and universities while also indicating a direction where a solution may be found. This problem boils down to the following question: What does it mean to learn as an adult after formal education has ended? Most philosophers who address educational questions typically focus on just two broad phases of education—education for childhood and for emerging adulthood⁸—and assume that whatever adult education might amount to, should, theoretically, be a direct correlation of the intellectual and moral “foundation” provided for in earlier life. Higher education is often represented as an unstable “middle ground” between emerging adulthood, on the one hand, and adult learning in a broad sense. The idea of vocation falls directly within the provenance of higher education; its relevance can be seen, thematically and pedagogically, in the transitions students make from emerging adulthood to full adulthood.

⁶ Ibid., 360.

⁷ Ibid., 363.

⁸ A term I use from Kyla Ebels-Duggan, “Autonomy as Intellectual Virtue,” in *The Aims of Higher Education*, eds. Harry Brighouse and Michael McPherson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015): 74–90.

Immanuel Kant, for instance, saw the acquisition of a concept of vocation as precisely marking the shift from a child's education to adult education: "At sixteen," Kant writes, a youth is

on the verge of manhood, and then education by discipline comes to an end. At this stage he learns increasingly to recognize his vocation, and hence must get to know the world. At this entry into manhood he must be apprised of his real duties, of the worth of humanity in its own person, and of respect for it in others.⁹

Yet Kant realizes, like Dewey after him, that there is a fundamental limit to the moral influence that a teacher can have upon a student's development of a concept of vocation and entry into adulthood. This fundamental limit can be partially attributed to vast differences between the life experiences of teachers and individual students. How can a teacher educate students about multiple vocational activities if such understanding depends upon adult learning gained only *after* formal education has ended?

There seem to be at least two obvious perspectives at play in any educational situation: the perspective of the student and the perspective of the teacher. These perspectives are connected, of course, but there is an important difference from which they essentially diverge. A student may be said to look *forward* while a teacher looks *back*. A student is defined by where they are going while a teacher is defined by where they have been. These different senses of self-direction, according to aims and goals, characterize the currency of their relationship. What students and teachers have in common are the burdens of the present moment and the satisfaction of their positional interests, however they may define them.

In a Deweyan sense, the educational *experience* of the teacher and student is markedly different. For Dewey, all experience depends upon two basic principles—continuity and interaction. Continuity, in his words, refers to how "every experience both takes up something from those [experiences] which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after."¹⁰ On the other hand, interaction refers to how "an experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment."¹¹ Individual learners—here collectively teachers and students—experience the present moment differently because 1) they have different life experiences upon which to draw from that inform future experience

⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, eds. Peter Heath and J.B. Schneewind (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 220.

¹⁰ John Dewey, "Experience and Education," In *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 13, 1938–1939 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 19.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

(continuity), and 2) they have wider and narrower understandings of what constitutes their “environment” and its relevance for their learning (interaction).

For the globally mobile undergraduate student today, the global workplace seems to be an indistinguishable part of higher education. This continuum seems to place impossible demands upon vocational autonomy. Students need to develop themselves while constantly learning more, crafting a public image and persona, and ultimately earning more. However, what students experience is a constantly changing, unsettling ground where values are constantly challenged and put into question. Ideally, the globally mobile student would like to find her vocation—or perhaps she has already found it—but this notion of a “vocation” is separated by many obstacles to her completing her path. Students have what might be called a dual consciousness when it comes to preparation for the world of work, the idealistic and the experiential. Ideals teach us what we should aim for; they are formed from a creative synthesis of prior experiences and imaginative thought extended into the future. Ideals operate side-by-side with students’ lived experiences, which evoke a world of unsettling choices and terrifying change, where keeping one’s idealized identity alive is a constant challenge.

Despite their lived experiences, students often arrive in college with certain idealizations and misconceptions about the world of work and their understanding of vocation. Two of the most common ones include: 1) that you choose one for life, and 2) that it all comes down to individual effort—the environmental conditions are easily manipulable for one’s own ends. The basis for this conclusion derives from my work with undergraduates at both ends of the four-year spectrum. First, as an academic writing consultant, I often help new undergraduates develop an academic and personal “identity” through writing in their major. This is particularly striking in the ubiquitous “statement of purpose” required for entry into many degree programs on campus. I have been surprised to discover that many new students have already formed inflexible notions of vocation as a single career goal, and they are often resistant to representing themselves as “unsure” or provisional. Second, through in-depth interviews I have conducted with advanced pre-service teachers on the cusp of graduation, I have discovered that certain memorable pedagogical activities, which stressed students’ practical inquiry with their formally “idealized” vocation of teaching, led to their development of a more nuanced conception of being a teacher. This more nuanced conception stressed teaching’s relation to other vocational interests in students’ lives, such as their involvement in political activism or religious communities, and the importance of these interests to the teaching vocation.

So, how can teachers use their own lived experience to present students with other ways of thinking about vocation? In his essay “The Education of Character,” Martin Buber describes the potent give-and-take of the teacher-

student relationship that thrives on a basic openness without, necessarily, shared understanding or conscious influence. He writes,

In all teaching of a subject I can announce my intention of teaching as openly as I please, and this does not interfere with the results . . . But as soon as my pupils notice that I want to educate their characters I am resisted precisely by those who show most signs of genuine independent character: they will not let themselves be educated, or rather, they do not like the idea that somebody wants to educate them.¹²

Instead of directly announcing one's intention to teach the meaning of vocation, the teacher must be willing to communicate directly of his or her own experience, or from the documented experiences of others. In Buber's words, an educator must have "the *will* to take part in the stamping of character [with the consciousness] that he represents in the eyes of the growing person a certain *selection* of what is, the selection of what is 'right', of what *should* be."¹³ In doing so, the pupil "accepts the educator as a person. He feels he may trust this man, that this man is not making a business out of him, but is taking part in his life, accepting him before desiring to influence him. And so he learns to *ask*."¹⁴ In our present context, what Buber is describing relates to students being able to question their choice of occupations, to ask: what is the purpose of this activity? This defines the basic vocational attitude—respecting a student's autonomy as a chooser through giving them multiple "selections of reality" to reflect upon—that we are striving for.

This approach necessitates a judicious plan of education, which draws upon the lessons learned from diverse adult experiences, including the teacher's. Such lessons—with the aim of providing helps and hindrances in the pursuit of vocational autonomy—introduce students to the role of multiple vocational activities and the importance of self-reflection upon vocational experience. I now consider how the notion of multiple vocational activities may be brought into the pedagogical practice of modern liberal universities.

BRINGING VOCATIONAL UNDERSTANDING TO THE UNIVERSITY

In his book *Toward an Ethic of Higher Education*, Mortimer Kadish suggests a model for better integrating the realities of professional life into liberal education. He argues that universities can convey the "structure of the profession and of its alternatives"¹⁵ through a focus on professional ethics in all areas of the

¹² Martin Buber, "The Education of Character," in *Between Man and Man* (London: Kegan Paul, 1947), 105.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 106, emphasis original.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, emphasis original.

¹⁵ Mortimer Kadish, *Toward an Ethic of Higher Education* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 168.

general education curriculum. According to Kadish, when professional schools are “pressed to ‘teach’ ethics, [they] are pressed to get their students to accept the conditions that will make their practices socially acceptable and hence the more likely to flourish.”¹⁶ Sometimes, for professionals, this involves an *escape* from ethical judgment and the confrontation of moral issues head-on. Rather than forming persons, on the one hand, who are “manipulators of the profession for their own ends . . . functionaries [who] follow rules strictly and literally,” educators should instead form “individuals who, aware of the rules and such precedents as are available, grant current practice its weight while entering into the relationships of their profession with eyes open to the consequences.”¹⁷ This latter type of professional is liberally educated, what Kadish calls operating in a “professional mode.” Students preparing for a profession in this manner have begun to develop a sense of vocation for an occupation, in Dewey’s sense, by applying their whole selves to the immediate and long-range challenges of the profession and its intersection with other vocations. This helps subvert the tendency we sometimes see of students who equate excessive specialization in a particular area with becoming a better professional. In order to safeguard against any single vocation becoming too dominant in the lives of our students, we should help make liberal professional education an “education in being,” as Kadish calls it, in order to fight the “dissociation of work and self, [marking] the failure of professional education.”¹⁸

Dewey provides us with some guidance for educating vocation, particularly in the early years of a child’s development, but he does not go far enough. There are obvious limitations to his discussion of types of jobs available, particularly within the American context today, with his predominant focus on manufacturing and commerce. However, he did recognize that our discussion of vocational education would need to change depending on the new economic conditions every generation encounters. The most persistent danger he foresaw with vocational education was its reversion to a “trade education” that ignores the condition of the human person: essentially, making schools, he writes, “an adjunct to manufacture and commerce.”¹⁹ Dewey’s main solution to educating vocation is his notion of “educating through occupations” that, unlike trade education, is “pursued under conditions where the realization of the activity rather than merely the external product is the aim.”²⁰ But, Dewey concedes that it is rather likely that corporations that oversee occupations often deny workers this ability to be educated in the liberal sense.

To illustrate this issue, I relate the following example. I once became familiar with an international student who had graduated with a business degree and had received a broadly liberal education at a U.S. university. His experience

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 116.

¹⁸ Ibid., 123.

¹⁹ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 369.

²⁰ Ibid., 361–62.

learning business at the university contrasted sharply with what he encountered on his first job, at a multinational corporation. Before he could begin work, this college graduate was required to take a six week training program that was intended to provide, “from scratch,” everything the new worker would need to know in order to fulfill the specific task requirements of his new job. He expressed frustration at what he perceived to be a corporate policy that preferred that new employees arrive as “blank slates,” with no prior knowledge (regardless of having graduated with bachelor’s degrees in business-related fields) of alternative practices that might lead to questioning how tasks were conducted. This example clearly represents a wide gulf between two different views of being a “professional”: one who is liberally educated, and thus with vocational autonomy, and one that evinces a subservient trade education. In a similar vein, Dewey uses the example of a student choosing engineering as a profession. A student is prone to believe that being an engineer involves mastering a set of stable knowledge and skills. But, Dewey says, deciding to be an engineer only provides a “rough sketch” for future discovery, and he likens it to Columbus’s map of America.²¹

Similarly, as educators, our guidance should not close down the options of students, but rather open them up. We should ask ourselves: how can students learn, while they are still in the relatively safe zone of a university, how to respond to these conditions they will likely encounter in the work world in a meaningful fashion? As Kadish observes, failure to consider how higher education can “open” itself up to a liberal understanding of vocation can lead to disenchantment:

Hurts and frustrations mark the conditions of life in the market, not all of them the consequences of the ill luck of the individual; some stem from what the work entails for almost anyone under the conditions of work. What they are, how people deal with them and how they deal with people are outcomes that higher education pushes out of its field of vision to the disadvantage of those it thus deprives.²²

The notion of vocation should be introduced to students in an experiential way, allowing them the opportunity to use their “moral imagination.”²³ Examples, particularly narrative films and documentaries, are rightfully suited for this task because they are open to interpretation. Examples should be paired with interactions with those who can speak to their involvement

²¹ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 364.

²² Kadish, *Toward an Ethic of Higher Education*, 133.

²³ For discussions of moral imagination and its relation to higher education, see Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); and David T. Hansen, *The Call to Teach* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995).

with multiple vocations and with site visits to local communities to learn about the ecology that allows choices to be made regarding vocation. These ideas can and should be introduced into various aspects of undergraduate coursework where the notion of profession, professional responsibility, career opportunity, and access to careers is an explicit or implicit consideration. What I have previously called “case experiences”²⁴ can be a way to afford students experience with multifaceted dilemmas that accurately represent the conditions they are likely to encounter in the search for vocations.

CONCLUSION

We want students to be able to reflect on their vocational choices, to realize the breadth of where these choices may be derived from, and not simply choose a single vocation or career path and work singularly toward it. Of course, we cannot fault students who possess that singular frame of mind and vision toward a vocation. Perhaps it has been longstanding. Yet we, as liberal educators, do a disservice to students if we keep from them other ways of thinking about vocation and sharing with them our own experiences, and those of others, who came to understand the world of work in a different sort of way. Returning the fruits of adult learning to the university allows students to understand, glimpse, what it means to become themselves in global society. In a Deweyan sense, we are expanding our ability to have further experiences within higher education.

²⁴ Mark Keitges, “Expanding Global Learning Through Case Experiences: Technological Ruminations on Dewey’s *Experience and Education*,” *The Journal of School and Society* 2, vol. 1 (2015): 6–12.
