

Mediating Work and Culture through Dewey's Integrative Vision of Vocational Education

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Abstract

John Dewey's educational philosophy provides a compelling resource for empowering adult vocational education through a cultural vision, ultimately rooted in a view of social democracy as the creative task of lifelong learning before us. This is supported by Dewey's interpretation of knowledge construction in its varied cognitive, ethical, and aesthetic forms, which provides the basis for transforming the perceived opposition between academic studies and vocational education in contemporary schooling, which I appropriate to the adult basic education field. To flesh this out, the essay homes in on the certified nursing assistant field through descriptive narratives, a nursing assistant training manual, and a corresponding lifelong curriculum framework. The challenges of implementing any aspirational vision are noted. Yet given its substantial grounding in experiential and transformative learning, progressive education, humanistic psychology, and a view of human resource management based on these influences, Dewey's cultural philosophy of vocational education opens up pathways that can move in this direction, and is, therefore, worthy of much deliberate consideration.

Keywords: pragmatism, Dewey, vocational education, democracy, certified nursing assistant

I have studied the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey for almost thirty years. His imaginative insights have played a substantial role in shaping both my "middle ground" practice and theoretical insights of adult literacy education (Demetrium, 2002). Through his comprehensive view of culture rooted in the exigencies of "lived experience," which, for Dewey, provides "the proper starting point of any philosophical investigation" (Pappas, 2014, p. 202), he offers an integrated model of knowledge acquisition in bringing theory and practice into close proximity. By culture, Dewey

refers to the wide range of practices, customs, and ideas that give shape to the prevailing ethos of an era, which includes scope for pluralistic perspectives as well as those sharply critical of the established order (Stuhr, 2016). He also uses the term in a narrower sense to contrast traditional views of vocational education that emphasize the merely practical realm to the academic subjects, commonly identified with culture, a dualism which he seeks to fundamentally reconstruct. I draw on both meanings throughout this essay.

According to Dewey (1922/2008), many experiences throughout our lives are rooted in taken for granted, habitual modes of behavior or attitude formation, which typically do not garner much focused attention. It is only when a disruption or question, of some compelling sort, occurs that a need for resolution emerges, provoking a quest for the transformation of a problematic situation to one that leads to its progressive closure. It is the stimulation triggered by the quest to transform a problematic situation of whatever scope, whether through logical inquiry (Levi, 2010), aesthetic attunement (Alexander, 1998; Eldridge, 2010), ethical probing (Pappas, 2008), or community engagement, ultimately rooted in a vision of cultural democracy (Bernstein, 2010; Pappas, 2008; Stuhr, 2003, 2016), that underlies the role of experience in Dewey's philosophy. It is such a search that gives force to Dewey's theory of knowledge construction that envisages problem solving in dynamically transactional terms between person(s) and the socio-cultural environment that envelops the quest for the type of knowledge that brings progressive resolution to the particular difficulty at hand. Dewey's cultural interpretation of vocational education draws on all these dimensions of philosophical reflection.

The polarity between vocational and cultural-based education that Dewey critiques in *Democracy and Education*, has been, to some extent, mitigated in contemporary discourse on the relationship between adult basic education studies, as a broad field, and the more particularized focus of workforce education. Topics such as "emotional intelligence," communication skills, problem solving, attunement to organizational culture, "lifelong learning" through metacognitive processing, and "informational technology" help to create a bridge between an industrial-based functional approach to occupational "skill" development and a more extensive,

post-industrial orientation, epitomized by the metaphor of the learning organization (Cavaleri & Fearon, 1996; Senge, 1990). This shift to a post-industrial worldview offers much to work with in coordination with humanistic and socio-cultural approaches to human resources management (Hatcher Group, 2019; Knowles et al., 1998). This reorientation gives shape to a good deal of practice in current models of workforce education.

This expansiveness of focus is noted, for which Dewey's philosophy of education has much to offer. In short, Dewey's philosophical interpretation of vocational education opens up a wide-ranging interpenetration of the relationship between vocational identity, in its multiplicity of dimensions, and themes and topics related to civic and global awareness, economic and financial literacy, understanding and mediating social systems of various types, and acute attentiveness to critical and creative self-awareness (Stein, 2000). Except in rare cases, the contextual range of such connections is mostly attenuated in current adult vocational education discourse. Assuming a dynamic relationship of some significant sort between the political, pedagogical, and the personal, the underlying limitation is that the various twenty-first century visions of adult education remain largely rooted in neo-liberal political, social, and economic discourse (Abendroth, 2014; Fleming, 2010; Smith, 2014) in preparing students for the post-industrial socio-economic order rather than one grounded in any robust political culture rooted in democracy. By contrast, Dewey's (1939/1998) vision of creative democracy, which "is forever that of creation of a freer, more humane experience in which all share and all contribute" (p. 343), provides a broader, and, arguably, more humane, context to situate current discourse on adult vocational education, one congruent with the field's own progressive dynamics.

A critical discussion in Dewey scholarship is the extent to which his interpretation of democracy is sufficiently robust to counter some of the more pernicious effects of a post-industrial ideology on this nation's body politic to provide sufficient scope for the expansiveness of democracy through education that he envisions. Dewey acknowledges this dilemma, although he does not sufficiently grapple with the significance its problematic underscores for any sustainable democratic vision to underlie educational theory and practice in the United States, especially one focused on workforce education (Kliebard, 1999, 2006). Against this critique, Dewey posits ideas as hypothetical constructs that serve a practical function in guiding the direction of a problem-solving inquiry of any sort through which to enact positive change, however ultimately gradually attained. It is in this respect that Dewey views democracy as an ongoing task—a “living option” (James, 1896/2012, Location Number 200) at the core of this nation's political imaginary—with potent practical intent, one that resonates with the highest aspirations of the U.S political culture (Demetron, 2005; Dewey, 1939/1989). In laying out his nearer-term task on the relationship between vocational education and culture, Dewey (1916/1944) contends that:

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 ...worker into touch with the problems of the day and the various methods proposed for its improvement (p. 318).

An implementation of such a vision linking adult education with vocational education along these lines would require a substantive change in current practice. It is one that needs to be rooted in the politics as well as pedagogy of adult education, one, ideally, grounded in the more progressive precepts of the field (Brookfield & Holst, 2011), one, as argued here, that has its origins in the U.S.

social democratic vision of the 1930s and 1940s (Elias & Merriam, 2005). On Dewey's view, it is precisely the freer, fuller cultural environment which the democratic vision of education opens up, in which, for him, “education, democratic life, and human flourishing are one” (Hansen, 2006, p. viii). It is one rooted in the most formative telos of this nation's political ideals, which provides the ultimate cultural matrix for vocational education to thrive. It is through the dynamic potency of this political vision that I situate the Deweyan impetus for shaping the field of adult vocational education.

The Centrality of “Lived Experience” in Dewey's Pragmatic Philosophy

Dewey's pragmatic worldview is premised on the assumption that regardless of theoretical complexity, genuine philosophical problems are rooted in the exigencies of “everyday lived experienced,” which, according to Pappas (2008) is the “most important philosophical inheritance we have received from” (p. 20) him. This “empirical naturalism” (Dewey, 1929/1958, p. 1a) is grounded in a “radical contextualism, by which...each situation constitutes a unique context” (Pappas, 2008, p. 41) through which intellectual construction, ethical behavior, aesthetic sensibility, and political culture emerge. Thus, “[w]e begin where we are, in a situation as participants, rather than as inhabitants of a culture, cultural scheme, or our society's norms” (Pappas, 2008, p. 42), except as these are selectively appropriated.

It is within this experiential sensibility that Dewey (1916/1944) transforms the traditional concept of mind (a singular noun) to a continuously operating verb—that of actively thinking—originating from the very perception of a problem to its proximate resolution in the attainment of an

aim that “consists in the progressive completion of a process” (p. 102). This includes working through potential roadblocks, discerning the viability of alternative pathways, and, particularly in the cognitive mode, with scientific inquiry as the operative model, setting up a framework of effectively testing and evaluating the most promising ways forward in resolving specific problems. In its application to a broad array of situations, such active intelligence is best viewed as an overarching sensibility to the intricacies of a problem, in which direct, cognitive capacity is one of its manifestations. Through such activity, individuals infer, evaluate, imagine, and hypothesize, as needed, in working through the various stages of a given problem, however variedly called for by the different types of problems under review, whether of a formally logical, ethical, or aesthetic nature.

It is through such a naturalistic philosophy that Dewey (1958, 1988) seeks to resolve some of the deepest-rooted dualisms grounded in the epistemological split between thought and action—which for him are simply different phases of an integrated problem-solving process—that has dominated Western philosophy since the time of Plato. It is in his rejection of such commonly accepted polarities of “labor and leisure, theory and practice, body and mind, [and] mental states and the world,” that Dewey (1916/1944) makes the case in his pivotal chapter, “Vocational Aspects of Education,” in *Democracy and Education*, that “the antithesis of vocational and cultural education” (p. 306), as commonly perceived, is similarly, and thereby falsely, based.

Transcending the Dualism between Work and Culture

On Dewey’s (1916/1944) interpretation, “vocation,” rightly understood, makes the “direction of life’s

activities... [more] perceptibly significant to a person” (p. 307) than other areas of engagement. This is so because the multiple challenges embedded in the vocational context evoke the rigor of intelligence required in “the projection of new possibilities [that] lead to search for new means of execution” (p. 224) in helping to create more flourishing work environments. In short, a vocational calling, identified as “one’s true business in life” (p. 308), which may or may not be expressed in a sharply demarcated occupational role, is propelled by the active exertion of “intellectual and moral growth” (p. 310). This, in turn, brings about such conditions that have the potential of drawing out of a person a highly developed set of competencies and aptitudes in meeting the challenges and opportunities opened by the intensity and subtlety of its varied pursuits.

In this, Dewey (1916/1944) called for a view of vocational education, in which intelligence, in its varied theoretical and practical dimensions, is built into the range of aptitudes required for the fulfillment of one’s calling—considerably more than simply technical mastery of the skills needed to perform specific occupational tasks. Dewey was far from disparaging “technical proficiency” (p. 317), which he viewed as essential to ensure maximum efficacy in the workplace and for the sense of intrinsic satisfaction attained by accomplishing superior work. His key point is that such mastery is only one facet in stimulating what I will call the vocational imaginary—essentially, an ideal construct attainable within the plausibility structure of a given culture—which draws out a wide range of life’s capacities in the creation, ultimately, of the good society, in whatever spheres an individual has influence, through one’s work.

In drawing on the imaginative insights of 19th century philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson

(1981), Dewey, like his predecessor, insisted that individual do not have one, but several callings related to their broader humanity. In exemplifying this, Emerson referred to “the planter... sent out to the field to gather food.... He sees his bushel and his cart and sinks into the [role of the] farmer.” Emerson contrasts this to “the Man on the farm” (p. 52) who situates the immediate work at hand through the more comprehensive context of his life and culture.

Similarly, for Dewey (1916/1944), any quest for a comprehensive view of vocation is marred in a too limited focus on the prescribed identity of an occupational role that defines it in a manner too “narrowly practical, if not merely pecuniary.” The contrast is that of an authentic sense of vocation that flourishes by the person embracing something of the more extensive contours of one’s identity through a calling, which makes any immediate work “activities” at hand “perceptibly significant.... because of the [many foreseen and unforeseen] consequences they accomplish, and [their] useful[ness] to his associates” (p. 307). One immersed in a calling draws on the various dimensions of one’s life in realizing some of the more far-reaching aspirations embedded in any specific task or role. While there are specialized aspects in meeting the challenges of any vocation, the person’s competence, “in the humane sense” (p. 308), is determined by its association with a broad range of proficiencies and sensibilities individuals bring from other facets of their lives, through all of what they have learned and valued throughout the course of living.

Practical Application

Let us consider the role of certified nursing assistants (CNAs) in drawing on some of their deepest values while caring for the elderly and infirm. While preparing this essay, I reviewed,

With Our Loving Hands, a collection of writings of adult students in the 1199 Training and Upgrading Fund in Hartford, CT, where I teach ABE classes. In that text, I came across a narrative of an immigrant from Jamaica, let us call him Robert, who was a cabinet maker back home, but took what some may consider a more “menial” position after migrating to the United States.

In reflecting upon his position as a CNA, Robert tells us of the “inspiration” he experiences as a “caregiver.” In getting at its essence, he stresses “find[ing] what they want and tak[ing] the time to understand our residents’ needs as they do struggle to find confidence in us.” In pushing further on the emotional risks in providing needed care, the real challenge for someone who views this work as a most intimate calling is “to understand their [resident’s] likes and dislikes, their fears, their embarrassments— [in fact] all their needs [which] are for us to try and understand.” In realizing that many of the residents had little choice in coming to the nursing home, Robert recognizes “their privacy is exposed” and is committed to protecting their vulnerability. Through such attentiveness, Robert has come to view “nursing assistance... a spiritual calling, even if it is only to listen to their last words and to comfort them so that they find peace in their lives” (Sheard, 2014, p. 57). In this sensibility, he offers poignant insight on Nodding’s (2010) description into “what care theorists take to be ontologically basic—the dyadic relation” (p. 265) between the care giver and the cared for.

Let us assume Robert possesses solid mastery of the technical skills required to perform his tasks at top proficiency; in seeking to sensitively tap into his residents’ most delicate emotional needs, he draws on core aspects of his own identity as a means of serving his residents. The result is that

he has achieved a level of fulfillment through which he has attained a sense of purpose and meaning in his work, which Dewey (1916/1944) identifies as an aesthetic perceptiveness, one also with a strong sense of spiritual devotion, in which for him, the two are inseparably merged.

Contrast this to the intensive care unit (ICU) technician who encountered a 67-year-old woman while making her rounds. When the patient put out her hand, desiring human touch, the technician pulled back, not willing to risk the vulnerable moment, or simply not viewing such contact as part of her job. It seemed that the technician, in that moment, enacted behavior that did not extend beyond her specialized role. In remaining focused on “technical method at the expense of meaning” (Dewey, 1916/1944, p. 308), she may have missed an opportunity to meet the humanity of the patient during the last two weeks of her life. Let us assume here, too, the ICU technician was thoroughly competent in the specialized aspects of her work. Yet, in failing to extend herself beyond the immediacy of her defined role, perhaps there was something of a missing imaginative capacity in the self-understanding of her vocational identity that a more expansive appreciation might have brought out.

Whatever idealizations embed my embrace of Robert’s narrative and however much I may be over reading the technician’s response to my mother’s emotional need, my juxtaposition of them here highlights what Dewey means by vocation and how it contrasts with the more constricted view he and Emerson critique as failure to extend oneself beyond the requirements of a specific set of defined occupational tasks. In Dewey’s (1916/1944) view, “it is not the business of vocational education to foster this [restricted] tendency” (p. 308). Rather, its purpose is to create a climate of holistic learning, one that allows a

person to integrate one’s own particular vocation in “its association with other callings,” which, in turn, establishes the social climate that enables “other members of a community” to get “the best service the person can render” (p. 308).

Whether one takes literally Dewey’s (1916/1944) claim that “education *through* [italics in original] occupations...combines within itself more of the factors conducive to learning than any other method” (p. 309) may depend, in part, on grasping what he means by occupations as well as by the word, “through.” To take the last matter first, which leads into the first, what is central here is not the ultimate result of a task or a series of tasks—though that remains important. It is, rather, the intelligence, discernment, skill, communicative competence, self-awareness, and moral sensibility exercised throughout the process of working, which through one’s calling draws out and expands on these capacities. That is, when well-coordinated and highly developed, these process-focused competencies are strengthened in their very exercise and extended through additional learning opportunities which build on interests as well as needs aroused through the vocational calling. Viewed in this respect, “an occupation is a continuous activity having a purpose.” It is “an organizing principle for information and ideas; for knowledge and intellectual growth.” An occupation serves as “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” (p. 309). It is an integrating frame of reference for organizing growing experiences and learning, ideally, through a wide range of sensibilities, competencies, and situations that draw upon some of the deepest capacities that give shape to personal and social identity.

To make this more concrete, consider the 469-

page *American Red Cross Nursing Assistant Training Textbook* (American Red Cross, 2013), which covers a wide range of topics, from providing detailed information of the many technical aspects of health care and patient safety to communicating effectively with patients and their family members. The text also provides comprehensive background on the health care system, including legal and ethical issues in providing care to nursing home residents, the skills and knowledge needed to serve as a critical member of the health care team, and career development. It also focuses on the emotional dimensions of providing care in addressing such matters as sexuality and intimacy, cultural differences, spirituality, dementia, and end-of-life care (American Red Cross, 2013, pp. xi-xvii). As a symbolic representation, the textbook exemplifies the broad range of capabilities a CNA would need to master the many challenges of the position. It mirrors something of the scope and depth of humane intelligence and service that Dewey views essential to his notion of an “enlarged and enriched” (Dewey, 1939/1998, p. 343) learning environment in drawing out, in this context, the extensive range of capacities a CNA, seeking a fulfilling vocation in this field, can expect to exercise throughout the course of a career.

Space constraints prevent an extensive discussion of the areas covered in this text, but the following passage highlights the critical area of emotional support CNA’s can provide, as we saw with Robert, as will be evident with Frances, below:

Many people learn the skills of caregiving, but not everyone can perform those skills with kindness, empathy and compassion. Empathy is the quality of seeking to understand another person’s situation, point of view or feelings. Compassion is the quality of recognizing another person’s hardship, accompanied by a desire to help relieve that hardship. Providing skillful care in a thoughtful way is an art. As you prepare for your job, you will learn the difference between just getting your job done and providing quality care that goes above and beyond basic expectations. Getting to know each

person as an individual and seeking to meet her emotional, social and spiritual needs, in addition to her physical needs, is the key to providing the highest quality care possible (American Red Cross, 2013), p. 7-8).

As an adult literacy program manager and ABE teacher, who has worked with scores of CNAs, I have become aware of the sensitive care so many seek to provide their patients, often within extremely difficult situations, sometimes under much duress. Such work, particularly in the emotional realm, as evidence in *Loving Hands* (Sheard, 2014), draws out a great deal within a person which includes, but extends well beyond what can be described, even in an in-depth training textbook. In seeking to provide aid in meeting the emotional needs of those under their care, I can only conclude that more than a few CNAs draw on some of their profoundest emotional and intellectual resources, which, at times, they only come to realize within the very act of reaching out to what may be viewed as beyond their accustomed roles, sometimes at the very edge of their perceived capacities.

Let us return to another CNA, (we will call Frances) who, due to a traffic jam was late to work. This resulted in “another tardiness” added to her record. While on her shift, she sought to serve Mrs. H. who was “hurting all over.” Frances told Mrs. H. she would inform the nurse. The nurse told Frances she gave the patient her medications. Nothing more could be done. Frances conveyed this to Mrs. H. She wanted to help rather than simply pass on what would be perceived as negative information but was at a loss as to what she could do. She was caught in a “perplexing situation” (Dewey, 1916/1944, p. 157). In seeking some viable way to respond, this called out a need, in Dewey’s terms, for “projection, invention, [and] ingenuity” (p. 158). Frances asked Mrs. H. how she could help. Mrs. H. invited her to “sit down beside me.” A sympathetic impulse emerged amidst her

willingness to be present, as Frances stroked “the back of her hand” (Sheard, 2014, p. 121). Further moved, Frances began to sing an inspiring hymn.

There is no secret at what God can do. With His arms wide open He will comfort you. There is no secret what God can do (Sheard, 2014, pp. 121-122).

Frances discerned how that heart-felt hymn, drawn from the reservoirs of her own spiritual depths, connected with that of Mrs. H’s. As they sang together, Frances witnessed Mrs. H. “transformed right before my eyes. The crying stopped [as] she sat up in bed” (Sheard, 2014, p. 122). Mrs. H. asked Frances to turn on the lights in her room. However ultimately ineffable, Dewey (1934/1989) refers to such an epiphany as a “consummatory experience” (p. 379), by which he means “a fulfillment that reaches to the depth of our being—one that is an adjustment of our whole being with the conditions of our existence” (p. 23). As Alexander (1998) explains, in such an aesthetics “we find the moment in which human alienation is [temporarily] overcome and the need for the experience of meaning and value satisfied” (p. 4). Frances returned to the floor, smiling, transformed, herself. Her change of mood surprised her co-workers who had noticed her angry disposition stemming from her tardiness, that morning. “At that moment,” Frances realized “it was not I who helped Mrs. H., but it was she who helped me” (Sheard, 2014, p. 122).

The events that unfolded between Frances and Mrs. H. were part of a stream of action linked to Frances’ willingness to undergo with Mrs. H. something of the emotional struggle that accompanied her pain. The shared hymn was an aesthetic epiphany that symbolically transformed the struggle, but the experience that enveloped the situation extended to Frances’s reflection upon her experience that came to fruition in processing her colleagues’ reactions to her altered

mood. This, in turn, expanded her understanding of what transpired. In this, Frances’ moral sensibilities in her desire to provide care, her quest for knowledge in searching how to help and in coming to understand the personal significance of that experience, and her aesthetic and spiritual impulses, imperceptibly merged. It is beyond my capacity to grasp what exactly transpired in that room. Yet, Frances’ secondary depiction in a written text is at least suggestive of something distinctively significant. Namely, the impact of her focused attentiveness to the subtle intricacies of how best to provide care in this difficult setting in delicate coordination with Mrs. H.’s responsiveness to Frances’ desire to emotionally support her.

Both Frances and Robert draw on their skills and sensibilities to provide support to those under their care in responding to the vulnerability and pain of their residents. They do so through their attentiveness to the humanity of those they serve, an understanding of what is and is not within the range of their capabilities and responsibilities, and what they can uniquely draw upon within themselves in meeting the challenges of the moment. Their formal training helps—a great deal, one presumes—in developing the many hard and soft skills needed to assume their responsibilities at a high-level of competence such work demands. Such professionalism, as highlighted in the Red Cross training textbook, includes the capacity to tap into the many intangible factors required to step up to the many foreseen and unforeseen challenges CNAs face in the hard work of transforming a job into a calling. What is called for includes but extends beyond what can be gleaned from formal training, and occasionally even beyond the specialized skills and knowledge gained through the course of a career.

The almost imperceptible additional step

is responsiveness to the unique needs and opportunities illuminated by perceptive attention to them within any given situation. In Noddings' (2010) terms, such attentiveness requires "receptivity, vulnerability to the suffering of others, acceptance of the obligation to respond as carer to the expressed [and unexpressed or implicit] needs of the cared-for" (p. 284). Noddings further notes that in any given context, this "may involve meeting those needs, diverting them, or sensitively rejecting them" (p. 284). In Dewey's term, such sensibility requires the discerning attunement of active intelligence, in its varied cognitive and intuitive dimensions, to discern what is uniquely called for in the immediacy of the situation in which participants are called upon to act.

A Working Model for a Lifelong CNA Curriculum Framework

In discussing the relationship between learning and action, Dewey (1916/1944) brings his vision of vocational education to full circle. In the effort to deconstruct the dualism which has historically polarized "vocational and cultural education" (p. 306), with the placement of the former in the inferior position, Dewey turns this around in making the case that culture, in its wide-ranging significance, is thoroughly infused within everything that a genuine calling opens up. In his vision, the role of vocational education "is not that of making the schools an adjunct to manufacture and commerce" (p. 316). Rather, it is that of "creat[ing] a disposition of mind which can discover the culturing elements in useful activity, and [thereby] increase a sense of social responsibility" (p. 320) in the process. Expressed in clearer language, vocational education in the Deweyan vein, provides the context where the resources of culture, in their varied dimensions, can be thoroughly worked out, regardless of whether more

so than in any other arena, as he contends.

The Red Cross training textbook is sufficiently broad in scope to provide a basic framework to support CNAs in their ongoing professional technical development. In creating lifelong educational programs that expands on this baseline, a comprehensive adult education program infused by Dewey's cultural view of vocational education, could also include units in the following topic areas:

- A substantial overview of human biology and psychology linked to the health care needs of nursing home and hospital residents needing long-term care.
- An exploration of career ladders in the health care industry and viable ways for CNA's to access the necessary vocational and educational resources to tap into them.
- A study of organizational culture and its application to the nursing home and hospital environments, with a special emphasis on the workplace as a potentially empowering learning organization (Cavaleri & Fearon, 1996; Senge, 1990).
- A technical, economic, and political overview of the health care system in the United States and comparison with other comparable countries.
- An in-depth overview of the service sector unions, such as the Service Employees International Union that support the program where I teach, including an understanding of its purposes, history, and current challenges, with special application to the health care field.
- A supportive unit on the broader labor union movement in the United States in its struggles for legitimacy and efforts to secure worker rights benefits in the private and public sectors.
- Given the predominance of women,

immigrants, and U.S. born minority groups who serve as CNAs, attentiveness to the social history and current issues central to the struggles and empowerment of these groups would also be germane.

These selected topics are designed to illuminate something of the scope of an idealized, though realizable, lifelong learning curriculum with and for CNAs. This curriculum framework starts from a more extensive scientifically grounded expansion of the Red Cross training manual, then moves to units on CNA career development and attentiveness to the organizational dynamics operative in the workplace contexts where CNAs are employed. The curriculum then expands into the broader socio-political arena in a unit on the healthcare system in the United States in its multidimensional components and implications. Moving more extensively into the social arena, this leads to the relevance of the service sector movement of the union of which participants are members or are eligible to join. As a logical extension, a unit on the history and contemporary study of the labor movement in its social and political dimensions is suggested. Given the adaptation of Dewey's cultural vision of vocational education in current adult education settings, a unit on the social history of the predominant groups serving in CNA positions in the United States, accenting current issues relevant to those groups, would represent an important component of such a comprehensive curriculum.

Implications

What I present here is only suggestive. Its fleshing out would require a great deal of work, ideally through a collaborative relationship involving the adult education, health care, and union sectors, including CNAs. In addition to the enhanced insights such collaboration opens up, it provides

the added benefit of building support for the sort of program orientation suggested here, since those engaged in creating it would be the most heavily invested in carrying it out. This would include scope for different constellations of constituents to tailor any proposed framework to their own unique contexts, with, as argued here, the Deweyan orientation on the relationship between vocation and culture serving as an overarching frame of reference.

Viewed through such a prism, vocational education would be suffused with broadly relevant social, political, economic, social, and scientific knowledge and would thereby be more deeply rooted in culture than commonly viewed when contrasted to the rarified fields of traditional academic learning radically separated from active engagement in daily living or from vocational models with, at most, limited cultural explication. In short, Dewey seeks to identify vocational education with the many dimensions of culture in the relationship between one's personal calling and the social environment in which one is engaged. In this, Dewey (1916/1944) answers his own question on "whether intelligence is best exercised *apart from* or *within* [italics added] activity which puts nature to human use" (p. 320) in lived experience.

A persistent challenge is the need for a sufficiently robust social imagination to envision such a view of vocational education that integrates culture, broadly defined, into its orbit. While there are resources within the adult education literature that operate in this sphere, perhaps there is need for a rearticulation of the field's more progressive influences to push back against prevailing tendencies that largely situate the field's legitimacy within a neoliberal social order. While the capacity to restructure U.S. political discourse along such progressive lines is well beyond the

purview of what the relatively marginal field of adult education can realistically attain, it can have influence in more localized spheres that involve networks of programs linked to health care unions and nursing homes through which such learning, as sketched out here, could be carried out. This, alone, would be challenging work, but one that has the potential of establishing some durable frameworks that could attain greater traction to the extent to which such programming is well developed and gains visibility through more extensive networks and communication venues that lend it greater legitimacy.

Conclusion

In Dewey's vision of cultural reconstruction, a vocational identity is synonymous with that for which an individual is most genuinely called, which, in whatever forms it takes, brings about among the best contributions that person can make for the enhancement of society as well as for the self. Understood in this manner, vocational education is designed to "produce in schools a projection of the type of society we would like to realize, and by forming minds in accord with it gradually modify the larger and more recalcitrant features of ... [our given] society" (Dewey, 1916/1944, p. 317). Clearly, this is an ideal that has not found much viability in traditional school-based vocational education (Kliebard, 1999). In light of the early 20th-century social progressive vision of adult education (Elias & Merriam, 2005), the impetus on self-actualization (Knowles et al., 1998), the potential power of transformative learning (Cranton, 2016), the emphasis on democratic politics highlighted in the critical reform vision of Brookfield and Holst (2011), and the importance placed on worker empowerment in certain studies in the workforce development literature (Hatcher Group, 2019), it has fared better

in the field of U.S. adult educational theory and practice during the past century.

These more progressive strains within adult education have continually operated in tension with a view of adult vocational education at the policy level linked to satisfying the human resource needs of the economic sector in fitting people to the world of work (Demetrian, 2005). There are few obvious ways of reconciling these tensions, in which the very struggle to work through them may be a challenging enough task. However ultimately piecemeal, moving toward Dewey's (1916/1944) vision of vocational education calls for "a change in the quality of mental disposition" (p. 316) needed for redefining the purpose of schooling as the enhancement of self, society, and culture in the continuous task of constructing a fuller, freer democracy in which all flourish.

Notwithstanding the seemingly intractable nature of the dominant view of vocational education as occupational training in the narrow sense shaped through the root metaphor of "efficiency" (Kliebard, 1995, p. 77), Dewey's powerful vision, embodied in the aspirational energies of the American democratic ideal, contains a source of visionary power, which, when imaginatively embraced (Pappas, 2008), has the capacity to unleash energies that creatively interact against the many forces that push against it. This, Dewey (1939/1998) characterizes as "faith in the capacity of the intelligence of the common man to respond with commonsense to the free play of facts and ideas which are secured by effective guarantees of free inquiry, free assembly and free communication" (p. 342), whether the immediate focus is the workplace, the ABE classroom, the community organization, or the neighborhood gathering.

This freely exercised intelligence represents a source of educational energy that needs to be pressed against the seemingly obdurate reality, whether in Dewey's day or ours, of a model of schooling that reinforces economic stratification through cultural reproduction forces that intensify tendencies toward social role stabilization. It is the subtle spaces operating between the aspiration and the current reality that may be more porous than what may be initially obvious that provides opportunities for the creative work of moving toward Dewey's integrative cultural vision of vocational education that he views as vital to the vibrancy of democracy "as a way of life" (p.

341). In Kliebard's (1999) words, "[t]he benefits of integrating vocational and general education extend, then, not simply to the revitalization of academic education by connecting knowledge with action, but to the infusion of vocational education of an intellectual substance that it has traditionally lacked" (p. 234). However modest such endeavors may ultimately prove to be—which can only even begin to be determined through the mettle of a great deal of testing—it is the prospect of this vocational imaginary as a way of living that may open up some intriguing pathways in the adult basic education sphere worthy of the most vigorous pursuit.

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