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### Curriculum philosophy: Progressivism

Many teachers know that education is a powerful instrument for the shaping of individual lives and society. However, it is important for the teacher to reflect on her role and to determine which philosophy of education influences her view on the curriculum and will be of benefit to students. This will help to chart or direct her journey as an educator. The word *education* refers very broadly to the total social processes that bring a person into cultural life. Many persons and social agencies are involved in the process of enculturation of the learner's mind (Guttek, 1997, p. 4). The family and peers, the neighborhood, the church, media/technology and the nation all have formative effects on the individual. However, students can also contribute to their own learning through curiosity, questioning or problem-solving.

Students are educated in schools. This environment helps to establish knowledge, values and assists with cultivating the preferred skills for the learner's development. The teacher develops the curriculum, which is the locus of the school's educational efforts. Curriculum itself is defined in varied ways and guided by different philosophies. There can be no question that curriculum designers, regardless of their philosophical convictions, seek to create valuable curricula that is worthwhile for the learner, states Guttek (p. 5). Educational leaders have discovered that philosophical disagreements have resulted in a variety of curricula; however, the focus for this paper will be on progressivism.

Progressivism as a philosophy is a reaction against traditionalism in schooling in the United States; it stresses the liberation of the child's needs and interests. Often referred to as "the

father of progressive education” William Heard Kilpatrick (1871-1965) believed that the curriculum should be based on *actual living* (Parkay & Haas, 2000, p 26). The learning stems from questions that the learner asks himself. Progressives borrowed the doctrine that children should be free to develop according to their interests and needs. They must also be free to think for themselves. The child-centered Progressives’ emphasis on children’s needs and interests led them to conclude that the curriculum should develop from the child—that the most effective school environment was a permissive one, in which the whole child is free to explore and act on his own interests.

Progressivism, the educational theory also highlighted by philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952) emphasizes that ideas should be tested by experimentation and that learning is rooted in questions developed by the learner. This means that the learner develops from his own experiences, questioning and reform. Progressives oppose authoritarianism and favor human experience as a basis for knowledge. Progressivism encourages intrinsic motivation, experiential learning and creative thinking, using the scientific method as an instructional approach—these help to give learning meaning and aid the student in developing a concern for the future (becoming a good citizen) and the world around him. From the origins of progressivism to the present, Progressives believe that children’s directly expressed needs and interests should take precedence over academic subject matters.

Progressive educational philosophy has been used in the development of the curriculum and William H. Kilpatrick sets forth the key tenets for application of the progressive curriculum (Parkay & Haas, 2000). He states:

- (1) The curriculum begins with the student's natural interests, and gradually prepares them to assume more socially responsive roles;
- 2) Learning is most effective if it addresses the real concerns of real students;
- 3) Students learn to become more worthy members of society by actively participating in socially useful work;
- 4) The curriculum should teach students to think intelligently and independently;
- 5) The curriculum should be planned jointly by teachers and students; and
- 6) Students learn best what they practice and live (Parkay & Haas, 2000).

Progressive education recommends a natural approach to education, one that stimulates all five senses in students (Herschbach, 1997). One champion educator, Marietta Johnson, uses this natural approach to great effect. Instead of sitting at desks, working on learning tasks related to nature. Johnson's students are allowed to engage with their outdoor surroundings. They record their observations and confirm their findings with reference materials using technology (Education.com, 2013). This is the scientific method at its best, operating to help students understand the world around them.

Many current technologies and projects can help teachers design progressive lessons, ones that will reach students beyond the classroom and that will influence their personal and social development. If John Dewey were around today, he would likely have approved of students learning how to use mobile applications such as Google Play, especially if the students are allowed the opportunity to plan, develop, and publish a mobile app. These students would

receive the significant benefit of practicing the digital skills that they live. The classroom becomes a real laboratory when students become makers, creators and innovators. Learning, then, is lived. There are many examples of student-created mobile applications as reported by the National Academy Foundation (Militello & Friend, 2013):

- *Find Your Way*—an app assisting people with disabilities using public transportation was developed by Grover Cleveland High School in New York.
- *Shop Local Raleigh*, an app helping users find and shop at locally owned and operated businesses developed by students from Apex High School in North Carolina.
- *Social Onion*, a professional networking app was developed by Pathways to Technology Magnet High School.
- *Recycle It*, a game based social app was created by Downtown Magnets High School in Los Angeles, California.
- *Kiwi Pad*—an assistive text to sound app created by students of A. J. Moore Academy in Waco, Texas (Militello & Friend, 2013, p 17).

Project-based learning has been used in the classroom environment for years and is a wonderful teaching method to spark the intrinsic motivation of students. Students can develop and design their own projects and learn business skills in the process when given the opportunity to explore entrepreneurial projects or internships (Militello & Friend, 2013). They can be exposed to letter writing, using simulations or developing a business plan. Rather than retaining and regurgitating information, students get to synthesize information and create something new.

Teachers can also introduce IPADs in the classroom setting. Using the IPAD as learning tool students can be introduced to a variety of social media and communication technologies that are useful inside and outside the classroom.

- *Skype*—a free internet communication medium allows for face-to-face, real-time communication and collaboration to video-conferencing and instant messaging.
- *Face-time*—another video chatting app that allows for connectivity. This can be used by teachers to keep students up-to-date with classroom activities or notices.
- *Edmodo*—this collaboration tool enables teachers in the classroom to monitor student's activities and participation within this platform. It is great for classroom management.
- Then there is *Facebook*, which is familiar to most students. When used in the educational setting, it can be a tremendously effective tool for student led chats. It can also be used for announcements, communication and managing schedules (Militello and Friend, 2013, p.103).

To conclude, Bill Clinton was an excellent advocate for progressive education. He was concerned about ensuring that his public policy and public opinion propelled progressive and democratic thinking (Holley, 2014). He believed that progressivism as a philosophy of education encouraged moral values, critical and creative thinking, as is necessary for shaping and changing society—in a way that promises to have an impact on the actual conduct of education (Philosophy of Education, 1999). Dewey and Kilpatrick would surely have approved of a change in the status quo of the traditional educational context in the United States.

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