

EDUCATION, LIFELONG LEARNING AND LEISURE

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Keywords: career, conspicuous consumption, contemplation, cultural continuity, democracy, education, habits, happiness, health, job, leisure, lifelong learning, Lyceum, materialism, liberal arts, philosophy, physical education, recreation, school, social justice, sport, time.

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Summary

Lifelong learning is a particular kind of self-improvement that is both voluntary and possible only after basic education. The primary value of lifelong learning is in the way it supports and reflects the drive for cultural continuity and the pursuit of happiness. Cultural continuity is used here to signify the drive to perpetuate socially constructed communities including language and the political, economic, and social institutions essential for the security of future generations. Cultural continuity is perhaps the most essential purpose of public education.

With regard to public education, when children and youth are taught the virtue of learning for the sake of learning, along with the utilitarian virtues of learning for the sake of career preparation and citizenship, the possibilities for lifelong learning and cultural continuity are increased. The association between basic education and lifelong learning is, therefore, closely linked. This conceptualization of public education is akin to the classical education practiced by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. At that time in ancient Greece, schooling and leisure had a common meaning. Just as education liberated the individual, leisure offered the freedom to make decisions about the ways to pursue a happy and a good life.

In contrast to this classical conception of leisure, contemporary culture has turned leisure into the most materially consumptive forms of discretionary goods and services.

This shift from leisure as lifelong learning to mass consumption undermines the values commonly associated with sustainability. It then follows that basic education of a particular kind is essential to lifelong learning and leisure; and leisure—classically defined—is essential to achieving sustainability. Two illustrative propositions are provided that demonstrate how the application of these concepts in public education can teach the values and practices that support sustainability. The first proposal argues for revising the conception of physical education by eliminating the associations to professional sports and instead adopting a conception with aims for self-development, character education, and the building of friendships. The purpose of this revision is to more clearly address the excessive materialism and associated patterns of consumption in sport that undermine the aims of sustainability. The second proposal recommends modification of the school health education curriculum from risk reduction at the center to one of pro-social and proactive lessons in cultural continuity. A school-based greenhouse curriculum is used to illustrate how this new curriculum can be shaped to teach lessons of sustainability.

1. Introduction

Lifelong learning is an aim of education. The adult who acquires the habits of scholarship in childhood will be more inclined toward scholarship over the life course. There is, however, a fundamental distinction between those habits learned in early education that have purposes attached to career and practical utility, and those habits of scholarship in which utility is of no concern. This is the distinction between learning math for the practical values attached to employment, and learning math for the sake of learning. In the first case scholarship has a clear purpose, and once that purpose is satisfied there is no need to continue to study. In the second case, the desire to learn is never fully satisfied and, when conditions allow, study continues. Here, forces external to the individual do not easily extinguish learning since the motivation to study and to know more resides in the individual. The second case illustrates the purpose of lifelong learning.

Lifelong learning is possible only after basic education. It has meaning to those who are not only literate and value knowledge, but also to those who have time free from the necessities of mere labor. Except for the financially secure and privileged, lifelong learning and leisure are not possible in countries where poverty and illiteracy are widespread or in places where war is the common experience over generations. In a world of more than six billion people, lifelong learning is a precious gift for a relative few. It comes largely from the luck of one's own birth, and carries with it the responsibility to use it wisely.

In the classical tradition, lifelong learning is the occupation of leisure. Unlike the common use of the word today, the ancient Greeks considered leisure as more than free time, relaxation, entertainment, or recreation. They associated leisure with contemplation, music, and the types of lifelong learning embodied in their finest academies. These ancient Greeks seemed to know that the quality of a civilization is determined by the quality of its leisure—and the quality of leisure is determined by the intellectual powers of the individual. This was as true in ancient Greece as it is today, for in leisure we ask ourselves what we ought do with our freedom. And it is through

our efforts to answer this question that we discover what we are made of and what we hope to become.

Lifelong learning, as it concerns cultural continuity and the sustainability of life supporting systems, depends on leisure.

2. Aims of Education

The public-at-large, and parents in particular, have a vested interest in public education. It is right to want the best education for our children, not only because we love them, but also because they are expected to perpetuate the cultural legacy of their inheritance. Moreover, it is the work of future generations to correct and avoid the mistakes of the past by creating an even better culture than the one they are given.

Cultural continuity as an aim of education is not, however, easy to accomplish or without controversy. Not only do people living in the same community disagree about their shared values but a good education is never formulaic. Moreover, knowledge is typically hard to acquire, and the outcomes of learning are never fully predictable. Yet the way one learns to learn is consequential over the life course and we do know more than a few things about the art of teaching.

When students are taught that the essential value of their education is to be measured against their employment outlook, they learn that utilitarian education is valued over the development of self and even the pursuit of a morally satisfying life. In schools where preparation for a job is the primary aim, the notion of a good life is fixed in material wealth. Education in this case is a commodity with a relative value. Once employment leading to material security is achieved, there is no need for continuing education or lifelong learning.

Opposition to using schools as training grounds for factories is not new. Those who believe in the traditions of democracy and liberal education have long guarded the position that at least one aim of education should be reserved for the self. That is, what students want to study, and what they intend to do with knowledge acquired from schooling is ultimately determined not by the faculty or the school, but by each student. Sustaining this view requires a full measure of faith in the moral capacity of people. Giving students the chance to make decisions that shape their futures affirms individuality and the associated freedoms of thought and action. These freedoms are inseparable from democracy even when schools fail to give them proper attention and status in the curriculum.

The question of interest here is not whether public schools should have utilitarian purposes tied directly to occupational outcome, for they should, but are they morally bound to do more? Certainly it is possible to hold these two purposes if the public will agree to the mission. The task, therefore, is to gain support for schools in which basic education for a career is no more important than the values attached to lifelong learning and leisure. In these schools, the responsibility for achieving the aims of education and the desire for self-development are understood as necessary for cultural continuity.

Education of this kind liberates students and bolsters our hope in their ability to take on the responsibilities of educating the next generation.

3. Ancient Origins of Education and Leisure

The roots of education in Western culture reach into ancient Greece and the life of Socrates (c. 470-399 BC) and the works of Plato (c. 428-c.348 BC). This legacy is a testament to the virtues of lifelong learning. Their followers were taught philosophy and the reasons to pursue truth for the sake of truth; the differences between pleasures derived from material success and those achieved in becoming a better person; and the values of education for the sake of a private life linked to civic virtue. For such purposes, Plato established the Academy of Athens (385 BC), in a public park honoring the hero Academos.

Aristotle (384–322 B.C) followed in the tradition of Socrates and Plato when he founded his own school in the Lyceum, another public park on the other side of Athens (335 BC). Like Plato's Academy, Aristotle's school of philosophy was by conception a place for study—not a training school for jobs in the practical arts. It is from the conception of lifelong learning evident in the schools founded by Socrates and Plato that the word for school was taken. In Greek, *scholē* means leisure or free time given to learning. And among the ancient Greeks it was Aristotle in particular who knew the value of leisure to education, and the necessity of leisure for culture.

In *Metaphysics*, Aristotle observes that the Egyptians had leisure time which led to the creation of mathematics.

At first he who invented any art whatever that went beyond the common perceptions of man was naturally admired by men, not only because there was something useful in the inventions, but because he was thought wise and superior to the rest. But as more arts were invented, and some were directed to the necessities of life, others to recreation, the inventors of the latter were naturally always regarded as wiser than the inventors of the former, because their branches of knowledge did not aim at utility. Hence when all such inventions were already established, the sciences which do not aim at giving pleasure or at the necessities of life were discovered, and first in the places where men first began to have leisure. This is why the mathematical arts were founded in Egypt; for there the priestly caste was allowed to be at leisure. (BK, I: CH 1, 981)

In this section from *Metaphysics*, Aristotle establishes a number of essential points concerning leisure. First, leisure is a noun—to be permitted. It is not simply the collection of material goods or a feeling akin to relaxation. Leisure is tangible—such as a proper education—with attributes to be valued and admired. His use of the word would never be joined with trivial pursuits or decadence. Second, the permission to have leisure is reserved for a relative few. Not unlike cultures today, leisure is more likely secured as a birthright accompanied with the freedoms brought with evidence of raw intellectual power. This class of citizens, granted the privilege of leisure, carries with it the responsibility of using it properly. Third, it requires education of the highest

quality. Those in the priestly caste in ancient Egypt were among the most highly educated of their time. Fourth, notice that Aristotle does not confuse leisure with pleasure, entertainment, or relaxation. In other writings, he explains the kinds and limits of pleasure, and why happiness is connected to virtue.

In the classical tradition, leisure is possible only where citizens have sufficiently mastered some standard of communal tranquility and public civility. Although notable exceptions prove otherwise, we do not generally expect to find leisure in the midst of poverty, war, wide spread social unrest, or among the uneducated that know nothing of the arts and sciences. That is, leisure is most possible only where social, political, and economic conditions recognize individual excellence and allow elitism as a formal part of class structure. In cultures where at least some of the population lives in comfort and tranquility, leisure is expected to bring about great benefits for all.

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Biographical Sketch

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