

VOCATION AND VIRTUE: A MODERN EDUCATIONAL PATH

Barb Gustafson

Recent news and media opinions question the utility and purpose of higher education in Canada asking, “is the liberal arts degree still useful?”, or “should training be for specific skills shortages?” Behind these questions is a more fundamental one: what is the purpose of education?

Vocation, derived from Latin for “calling,” has come to mean, within education, occupational training. Virtue, also derived from Latin, speaks to intellectual or moral excellence. As demonstrated in Canadian practice, there is a tendency to divide the educational path into vocation or virtue: an intellectually virtuous path of liberal university education, or a practical vocation-based path through technical schools and colleges. This division is a reflection of a long, and sometimes dark, history of educational philosophy.

Plato saw education as necessary for the elite members of the city state, so they would be fit to lead. The education of guardians focused on physical, and intellectual, development. While he saw no need to educate women or lower-class men in a similar manner, Plato acknowledged that practical skills were necessary to ensure comforts.¹ Plato’s pupil, Aristotle, similarly saw formal education as limited to the highest levels of society. The pursuit of truth represented the greatest virtue and the greatest happiness, but this opportunity was not afforded those who laboured in the practical arts. Aristotle did see a connection between practical and abstracted knowing: *techné*, or practical knowledge rooted in nature, was connected to *epistémé* or abstracted knowledge, and ultimately to *sophía*, or wisdom.²

Modern educational philosopher John Dewey sought to retain the best of Plato’s thoughts on education, while weaving in European ideas advanced by Rousseau and Locke, and to marry these ideas with American individualism and equality ideals. In Dewey’s view, education was both an advancement of the individual, and advancement of society.³

Dewey’s ideals were tested by the realities of his time. Individualism rose through such monumental changes as the French and American revolutions; yet the industrial revolution perpetuated class structure, and limited educational opportunities for working people. The education of the elite continued through grammar schools and

¹ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (1888): Book III 416a-417b, <http://classics.mit.edu//Plato>.

² Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (1885): Book 8, Part 11, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle>.

³ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1916), 13-16.

universities for gentlemen's sons.⁴ The education of the working class, once dominated by the guilds that taught skills and traditions through apprenticeship, was reduced through the movement of craftsmen to factory assembly lines.⁵ Over time, compulsory education for the young was established, but often from the view of creating good workers for industry. *Training* came to be seen as little more than Pavlovian conditioning for specific tasks, while *education* was taken on by reformers of the day to become the realm of higher learning. Training of that time has been termed "a capitalist plot to oppress the common people".⁶

Dewey argued that vocational education of the early 1900s should go beyond industrial interests and include intellectual development as an essential part of democracy. Despite his fervour, Dewey's arguments did not sway the 1915 Commission on National Aid to Vocational Education: "Dewey wanted education; the commission wanted training".⁷

Vocational training has been used not only to serve industry, but to subjugate particular groups. Not long before Dewey's writings, education for newly emancipated American slaves was debated. The establishment of institutions for the education of African-Americans was a huge step forward for a group that had been denied formal education, but leaders including Booker T. Washington pragmatically aimed for economic gains through vocational training, arguing that "it was more valuable for a poor African-American to earn a dollar in a factory job than spend one attending an opera".⁸

Canada followed a similar path in its developing society. The classical divide of one form of education for the upper class and another for the working class was imported by the founding fathers of Canada.⁹ As the fur trade gave way to settlement, the existing inhabitants became an issue. A partial solution was vocational education. Davin's *Report on Industrial Schools for Indians and Half-Breeds* was delivered in 1879; it

⁴ John Lyons, Bikkar Randhawa and Neil Paulson, "The Development of Vocational Education in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Education* 16, no. 2 (1991): 137-150, doi: 10.2307/1494967.

⁵ Christopher Winch, *Education, Work and Social Capital: Towards a New Conception of Vocational Education* (London: Routledge, 2000), 85.

⁶ John Lyons, Bikkar Randhawa and Neil Paulson, "The Development of Vocational Education in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Education* 16, no. 2 (1991): 138, doi: 10.2307/1494967.

⁷ Richard Becker, "What are the Objectives of Vocational Education?," *The Phi Delta Kappan* 61, no. 8 (1980): 534-536, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20385592>.

⁸ M. Garrett Bauman, "The Double Consciousness of Community Colleges," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 54, no. 9 (2007): B14-18, <http://www.proquest.com>.

⁹ John Lyons, Bikkar Randhawa and Neil Paulson, "The Development of Vocational Education in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Education* 16, no. 2 (1991): 137-150, doi: 10.2307/1494967.

set in motion the residential school system and its legacy. Davin said education was necessary to civilize young aboriginal people, but should focus on practical skills needed for farming or servant roles.¹⁰ Education was a means to assimilation, with no intent of individual advancement.

Today in North America, education is a right in childhood and an expectation into adulthood. All people are legally entitled to education in all its forms. It can be argued we are far advanced from the limits of Ancient Greece, or even 19th Century North America. Yet while opening the doors to greater access, we may be rejecting the best of Aristotle and Plato, in favour of more limited training.

A survey of Canadian high school students and their parents showed the primary reason for pursuing higher education was a good job.¹¹ To this end, postsecondary institutions have an array of job-specific programs, yet employers feel graduates are ill-prepared for employment: attributes including critical thinking, research skills, and the ability to work through ethical issues are deemed lacking in graduates.¹²

Watt-Malcolm and Taylor¹³ argued current approaches to vocationalism in Canada are an economic equation: the demand side driven by industry, as educational institutions work to meet these needs; the supply side based on developing human capital, with rewards to the individual and society through greater earning power. Graduates become entrepreneurial in selling their acquired skills, looking for the best wages rather than a true vocation, while employers look for the best value available for their salary dollar, including hiring degree holders regardless of the educational requirements of the job.¹⁴

Is there a middle ground? Among educational practitioners, the movement to combine liberal education and job-specific training has taken on the term *new vocationalism*, described by Lehmann and Taylor¹⁵ as vocational education with an

¹⁰ Nicholas Davin, *Report on Industrial Schools for Indians and Half-Breeds* (1879): <http://archive.org>.

¹¹ Student Awards, *Path from High School to Higher Education: Insights into Student and Parent Decision-Making* (2012): <http://www.studentawardsinc.com>.

¹² Hart Research Associates, *Raising the Bar: Employers Views on College Learning in the Wake of the Economic Downturn* (2012): 6, <http://www.aacu.org>.

¹³ Bonnie Watt-Malcolm and Alison Taylor, "Get them young and train them right': Negotiations in a VET Partnership," *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education* 20, no. 2 (2007): 57-70, <http://www.proquest.com>.

¹⁴ Hart Research Associates, *Raising the Bar: Employers Views on College Learning in the Wake of the Economic Downturn* (2012): 4, <http://www.aacu.org>.

¹⁵ Wolfgang Lehmann and Alison Taylor, "Giving Employers What They Want: New Vocationalism in Alberta," *Journal of Education and Work* 16, No. 1 (2010): 45-67, doi: 10.1080/1363908022000032885.

enhanced connection to academic content and a critical view to employment and the workplace. New vocationalism is “eschewing academic–vocational divisions and supporting the idea that all workers need to be ‘knowledge workers’”.¹⁶ They suggested that new vocationalism can create a place that lifts up vocational training to be more than “a ‘dumping ground’ for low-achieving high school students,”¹⁷ to offer educational and capacity-building opportunity to young people for whom traditional university education is out of reach financially, intellectually, or practically. Hyslop-Marginson¹⁸ approached the argument from the other side, saying liberal arts education needs to incorporate practical aspects rather than rejecting productive wisdom as beneath its aims or its students.

As seen by the scrutiny given it over centuries, education is important to society, as well as to individuals. Aspects of equality of opportunity, individual happiness and fulfillment, and the common good built through individuals’ contributions to society, should be considered as equal to the needs of industry. Within a democratic country such as Canada, where individual rights are enshrined in our highest laws, the right to a full education for all should be upheld. *Techne* and *sophia* can combine, rather than being separated into vocational and virtuous paths.

Biography

Barb Gustafson is a PhD candidate in Educational Administration at the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. She is also a faculty member at Saskatchewan Polytechnic, the province’s primary technical institute. Her doctoral research topic is effective teaching practice in vocational education, focused on the transition of tradespeople to trades teachers.

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¹⁶ Ibid., 46.

¹⁷ Ibid., 47.

¹⁸ Emery Hyslop-Marginson, “Liberalizing Career Education: an Aristotelian Approach,” *Alberta Journal of Educational Research* 48, no. 4, (2002): 0, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/228621066>.