

Emmett Wald

Prof. John Nowicki

EDUC 633

30 May 2021

### Philosophy of Education

My philosophy of education is fairly eclectic, not a close match for any one of the philosophical approaches discussed in our reading. However, if I were to choose the philosophies and theories piecemeal, I would say that my philosophy is strongly rooted in Reconstructionist theory, and is a blend of Realist, Pragmatist, and Existentialist philosophies. I believe in the critical approach of Reconstructionism; the experience and abstraction of Realism; the subjectivity of Pragmatism; and the personal choice of Existentialism.

My metaphysics leans more towards progressive than traditional thought. I believe that we live in a physical reality that we can interact with, but meaning is what we make of it. There is no inherent meaning or purpose to life, nor is there some higher intelligence pulling strings behind the scenes. We each decide for ourselves what meaning we wish to find or create in our lives. We create this meaning through our interactions with the world we live in, including other people. In terms of the philosophies outlined in our reading, this seems to be a blend of Realism, Pragmatism, and Existentialism.

Given that I believe there is no inherent meaning in life, it may not be a surprise that I do not think there is such a thing as absolute truth. Knowledge is a constructed framework that we use to make sense of our experiences and make decisions. It consists of observations and interpretations that are shaped by previous experience, knowledge, and values. When we share knowledge with others, we are sharing not truth but rather sense-making. Different cultures and

different individuals within cultures develop their own knowledge frameworks. One person's knowing might conflict with another person's, and in fact there may be internal conflict between different aspects of an individual's knowing. No knowledge can be truly objective because there is no single truth to measure knowledge against.

Logic is an attempt to apply objectivity, but objectivity does not exist. Valid thinking must not rely solely on a logical framework for legitimacy. Instead, the thinker must acknowledge their inherent subjectivity, recognize their biases, and proceed from there. Overreliance on the scientific method has in fact undermined the validity of scientific thought by creating a false objectivity and neutrality that simply does not exist. No individual can be without biases; therefore their thoughts are also biased.

This epistemology does not fit clearly with any of the philosophies. Pragmatism does advance the value of experience, but is wedded to the scientific method. Existentialism validates the scientific method as well, and though it directs knowledge towards decision-making, it focuses on metaphysical questions of life and death much more than the everyday. Realism might be the best fit: it recognizes the centrality of observation (sensation) and interpretation (abstraction), and frames knowledge as a form of sense-making, though it still seems to lean towards a positivistic view of truth.

Similarly, I would say that values are culturally dependent, rooted in discourse and social norms. Mainstream values develop as a means to create a cohesive, harmonious, and/or sustainable society: if everybody believes the same things, there will be less conflict; but also, the values themselves are designed to create social order. Personal values develop in response to the dominant discourse, as a way to make sense of one's role in the world. These personal values may be largely in line with broader societal values, or they may run counter to the mainstream.

In our pluralistic modern society, individual values are diverse. This adds another layer to personal value systems: individuals must also develop values regarding how they interact with others' conflicting values.

In applying my underlying philosophies to the context of education, I take a critical approach very similar to that of Reconstructionist theory. I posit that education in the USA is typically an attempt to indoctrinate belief in and compliance with our exploitative capitalist plutocracy. Education *should be* an opportunity for all students to learn problem solving, critical thinking, and communication skills; to critically learn about the discourse society has created to make sense of the world (including politics/government, history, mathematics, and sciences); to learn about current events and consider what it means to be a global citizen; to be empowered to make their own choices about what is true; to learn about different cultures so as to develop a robust personal value system; and to be given the tools to explore and shape the world they live in. This education should be accessible to all, but should center the needs and experiences of those traditionally excluded: gender minorities, BIPOC, disabled and mentally ill students, immigrants (included those who are undocumented), ESOL, and those at the confluences of these identities.

What is the role of a teacher in such an education? I believe that a teacher's role is first to create a safe environment for students be present with their whole selves. Only once that foundation is established can students find the capacity to conduct thought experiments and overcome cognitive barriers, processes that involve trial and error and productive struggle. The teacher is there to facilitate, encourage, and empower students as they engage in critical problem solving. A teacher can offer their students resources, insight, challenges, perspective, and tools for sense-making and knowledge production and critical thinking about the world.

The structure of such an education would be interdisciplinary, recognizing that subject divisions are arbitrary and restrictive. It would also recognize that tracking and even grade divisions are arbitrary and counter-productive, instead allowing students' developmental strengths and weaknesses to guide their class placement, and letting a student be "ahead" in some contexts and "behind" in others without feeling the need to use labels of exceptionalism. Collaborative, student-driven, project-based learning would be the primary mode, with teachers introducing topics and concepts, leading exploratory activities, and guiding students in developing their own projects to advance and demonstrate their learning. This structure empowers students as shapers of knowledge, advances empathy and social skills, and helps students develop the skills and tools they want and need as they move through the world.

This approach to education is largely in line with Reconstructionism, but with an important distinction: while Reconstructionism places societal goals first, my philosophy of education puts individual students above all else. School is a social tool, but its primary goal should be the empowerment of each individual human being who enters a school as a student.

Though my overall philosophy is eclectic and does not neatly match up with existing philosophies, I believe that it is internally consistent and forms a strong foundation for teaching. I believe that knowledge is socially constructed, and that encouraging students to think critically and examine their biases will serve them in all intellectual pursuits. I believe that current systems of schooling systematically exclude or demean socially marginalized students, and that this needs to be actively countered by compassionate, well-trained teachers. Above all, I believe in students' autonomy and individuality, rejecting the belief that schooling should shape them in the service of some underlying truth or greater authority.