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Viewpoint: Life-long learning: blessing or curse?

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Viewpoint

Life-long learning: blessing or curse?

It is not uncommon to see vocational education, career education and adult and community education treated as if they all had something in common. Assuming they share at least one important characteristic, we may well wonder exactly what this characteristic is. I, for one, would be willing to say that it consists in an ineradicable commitment to the idea of "life-long learning." In one respect this idea is as simple as it sounds, i.e., learning should continue until the end of life. But we must remember that those committed to this idea are not talking of learning in general, but learning in a formal sense, a sense which regards informal or random learning as inadequate for contemporary needs.

Thus, to be committed to life-long learning is not only to be committed to learning throughout life, but to be committed to the life-long imposition of planned instruction. This second element explains why supporters of life-long learning inevitably express an interest in those who are outside the traditional school population. They believe that moving beyond considerations of age and social standing is the only way education will become more effective and humane.

Does the commitment to life-long learning really represent a rational and humane posture? Here I would say, without hesitation, "maybe yes and maybe no." My reply is undoubtedly equivocal, but the equivocation is not a consequence of indifference; nor less is it a result of failure to give this matter serious thought. Rather it comes from the recognition that life-long learning can be generated by a number of different, and, perhaps conflicting forces.

From one perspective learning can be seen to have a clear but narrow focus. We learn to get by in the world, to get a job, make a living, to raise a healthy family and, with a bit of luck, to give something back to the society which has provided us a material and cultural homeland. From a second perspective, however, learning includes much more. In addition to having practical and moral benefits, or sometimes we might say, rather than having practical and moral benefits, learning should be pursued for its own sake. We learn because it gives satisfaction, or provides understanding. We learn because we enjoy the experience of increasing emotional and intellectual capacities. Here we need not distinguish between what is useful and what is helpful to the heart or the head. What is trivial and irrelevant is a matter for personal determination. Impositions by second and third order parties develops a character like unjust or repressive political policies.

Life-long learning can operate from either of these two perspectives. So far as I can see, its defensibility as an educational objective is a function of which perspective is given priority. If learning is conceived only in practical terms and excludes as unimportant what is materially and socially useless, then life-long learning is not a very attractive idea. On the other hand, if conceived so as to include the interests of the eccentric, then life-long learning might well represent a worthy aspiration.

In making this judgment I do not mean to suggest that the broadest conception of learning is always most appropriate. It might very well be that more narrow conceptions are most always called for. But when we are talking of life-long learning and not learning of lesser duration, the broadest conception of learning we can possibly employ should be the one we finally select. Why is this so?

The answer seems simple to me. To learn in the narrow sense demands a response to actual pressures from the environment. These pressures are sometimes limited to forces of nature in the raw, but usually they include social demands too. Most of our lives are spent trying to cope with these pressures. We have little time to deal with anything else and thus little opportunity to choose our interests or goals. If at some point in our life we find ourselves free from external dictates, why should we then turn around and voluntarily submit to the will of someone who wants us to re-enter the competitive market place. It strikes me as irrational for anyone to do so, and immoral for anyone to force us into a game we would rather not play.

If learning is conceived more broadly, however, if it is motivated and defined by the learner himself, we might not be able to see it as an obvious and unjust imposition. So long as life-long learning does not force people to face problems that are better ignored, or to deal with problems that are created artificially, or to confront issues that are better settled in other ways, it can do no harm, and might well do some good. But be forewarned. Where there are no problems, or where problems are not our problems, or where others are better suited to the task, there is no reason under the sun why we should be cajoled by others to learn.

Am I clear where I stand? My remarks are not designed to oppose learning, per se, as if taking an anti-intellectual stance. I want to oppose the idea of learning for a lifetime when it is limited to what others claim is important or restricted to what we believe we have a moral obligation to heed. After all, flights of fancy and aimless pursuits can have their value too. At least they provide a respite and a sense of liberation from the normal pressures of life. And I suspect that, in the end, learning under these conditions will prove to have practical advantages too.

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