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# THE INTERDEPENDENCY *of* VOCATIONAL *and* LIBERAL AIMS *in* HIGHER EDUCATION

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*It is not educators' role to dissuade students  
from seeing college as a path to a career.*

*It is our role to help students see  
the larger purpose in the work they choose.*

“WHAT DO I WANT TO BE when I grow up?” My four-year-old regularly asks himself this question, and at this point in life, he entertains an astonishing array of possibilities: pizza maker, soccer player, and Jedi knight currently are top choices. The question of their future life work is also a focus for many college students. But unlike my four-year-old, many college and university students are zeroed in on their vocational pursuits. Often very narrowly focused, many college students simplistically equate a college education with a vocational education. In situations of advising, teaching, or life coaching, we often encounter students who believe that college is largely preparation for a job. Such a view diminishes the importance of the humanistic and intellectual inquiry that is so important to college life. Rather than asking themselves, “How do I wish to live?” many students ask, “How can I learn

how to make my living?” This essay explores how faculty and student affairs educators can help students better integrate these two questions.

Erin, an eighteen-year-old woman from rural Ohio, has enrolled in my seminar Sociocultural Foundations of Education, one of the first undergraduate courses in the teacher education program. On the first day of class, we are discussing our expectations of the course and of one another. Erin says, “I want to learn how to be a good teacher.” This is a simple and profound wish, one shared by many of her classmates. How do I become a partner in this goal while simultaneously enlarging, expanding, and deepening what Erin means by “being a good teacher”? How do we as classroom faculty and student affairs educators help Erin make personal, intellectual, and holistic meaning of her own vocational aspirations?

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BY KATHLEEN KNIGHT ABOWITZ

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Like many of us who advise, teach, or counsel college students, I regularly encounter students who are seeking a particular degree for vocational purposes. Most U.S. students seek degrees because they want to secure what they consider to be a good (that is, white-collar) job. The Higher Education Research Institute's annual survey asked students to rate the reasons they chose to pursue a college degree, and more than 70 percent of all respondents from public universities in 2004 cited the following reasons as very important in deciding to go to college: "to get training for a specific career," "to get a better job," and "to be able to make more money." Contemporary college students overwhelmingly view higher education as the means to the tangible end of employment.

While a student may have a general interest in a wide array of ideas, an emphasis on vocationally oriented learning can edge out wider interests and pursuits. Typical requirements of accrediting agencies have not helped. The liberal aims of education, especially as taught through the humanities fields of philosophy, literature, and the arts, are thus increasingly subjugated to the overwhelming power of courses and learning objectives that are practical, applied, and serve as a direct means to the desired end of employment. A college student completing a licensure program in elementary education in the state of Ohio, for example, must complete only one three-credit course on the historical, philosophical, and cultural foundations of education and schooling as part of a 128-credit-hour program. This signals a way of thinking about work that is segregated from a broader and more holistic view of education itself. This conception of education is not a radical new shift in thinking, nor a way of thinking about professional education unique to the field of education, nor unique to the state of Ohio. It reflects larger cultural shifts in the way education and its purposes are viewed.

This segregation of liberal and vocational aims defies the holistic nature of what it means to live a fulfilled human life in which paid work occupies a central but not exclusively defining role. (When I use the term *work* in this essay, I will be referring to paid work, although I recognize that as a member of a family and as a citizen, I do much meaningful work that is unpaid.)

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**Kathleen Knight Abowitz**, associate professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at Miami University, teaches courses in social foundations and philosophy of education. Her scholarship explores questions of community, the public, and citizenship education.

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While vocational studies focus on the world of work, liberal studies focus on the problems, experiences, and questions of being human. And surely inquiry into the human condition, including questions of purpose, value, and meaning, is not less important than questions of vocation. Indeed, one's work and professional identity formation are infused and shaped by the broader, exciting questions of meaning and existence. Students like Erin want to become good professionals, but preprofessional programs for educators and other vocations must be cognizant that becoming a good teacher is a human, not merely technical, enterprise. Our teaching and curricula need to reflect the connected nature of the vocational and the liberal, two differing but interrelated aims in higher education. Most students see their academic lives—their liberal arts classes and the courses in their academic major—as segregated domains. In the same way that many student affairs educators seek to purposefully stitch together the seams of the curricular and cocurricular domains, so should all educators aim to help our students more purposefully bind together the falsely separated spheres of liberal education and vocational education. An example from my own teaching demonstrates how powerful it can be when we help students to connect questions of professional preparation (vocational aims) with questions of existential meaning (liberal aims).

### WHAT SORT OF LIFE DO I WISH TO LIVE? EXPLORATIONS THROUGH ART

**A**S A FACULTY MEMBER in the School of Education and Allied Professions, I regularly teach an applied ethics seminar for graduate students who aspire to work in K–16 educational settings. For most students in a school of education, studying a field like philosophy of education is a one-shot deal. Most vocational programs have no more than a smattering of such offerings, and the program in which I teach is no different. Courses in ethics and philosophy of education usually are outliers within their program. The disadvantage of this position is that it is difficult to teach against the grain of the technical, instrumental bent of many vocationally oriented programs. The advantage of this position in both the undergraduate and graduate classes I teach is that the terrain of pedagogical possibilities is wider, and students know that this terrain will likely overlap with personal concerns and questions. Above all, students expect the unexpected in an ethics course. As an explicit study of value and moral meaning, it cannot help but become personal in the sense of intersecting with one's own moral commitments, questions, and strivings. That such personal forms

of learning are rare in most college classrooms speaks, perhaps, to why higher education has become meaningful to many students only for instrumental purposes—to get the job.

My goals for this seminar in ethics—to teach moral concepts, to develop moral reasoning skills, to explore moral dilemmas—are, in many senses, typical of other such courses. These are important learning goals, but too often ethics courses can become forums for students to more clearly articulate and justify what they believed when they came in the door on the first day of class rather than inquire into their beliefs, their habits, and their own moral thinking. As I read Martha Nussbaum's *Cultivating Humanity* over several semesters of this course, her notion of the "moral imagination" inspired me as a way to have students see outside their own perspectives. Nussbaum uses this term to refer to the ability to see, perceive, and feel moral situations through "habits of empathy and conjecture" developed particularly through experiences with literature and the arts (p. 90). Nussbaum argues that a college education must include the cultivation of our moral imagination; through our liberal studies, we must develop capacities for what Steven Fesmire calls "empathetic projection," or taking the attitudes of others into account when approaching social issues, and "creative tapping [of] a situation's possibilities" to find innovative and effective solutions to moral problems (p. 65). Because educators must constantly engage with diverse others in morally complex situations, cultivating the powers of moral imagination can be critical to their attaining a successful professional life. I asked myself, "How is my applied ethics curriculum helping students to cultivate the important quality of moral imagination so necessary for an ethical professional and personal life?" The question motivated me to construct an aesthetic experience in some of my undergraduate and graduate courses, including my seminar on applied ethics for educators.

I choose the term *aesthetic experience* consciously. An encounter with works of art is not inherently valuable or important. The value of the aesthetic in teaching for humanistic inquiry is in the kinds of experiences that an encounter with an art object or performance can provoke. To experience art is to experiment, to undergo

an encounter that breaks the routine of habit and mundane ways of seeing and living every day. Experiences with art heighten our perceptions and sharpen our imagination. Maxine Greene argues, "Imagination is not only the power to form mental images, although it is partly that. It is also the power to mold experience into something new, to create fictive situations. It is, as well, the power—by means of sympathetic feeling—to put oneself in another's place" (p. 30).

Aiming to expand imaginations and more creatively explore the ethical concepts of compassion and justice, I collaboratively constructed an aesthetic experience for the students in the ethics class with Cynthia Collins, an educator in my university's art museum. I discussed my learning goals with her and shared the text that provided the conceptual underpinning of the class's continued discussions of compassion and justice, Nussbaum's *Cultivating Humanity*. During one fall semester, we constructed an experience for the students that during one fall semester centered on a compelling photography installation entitled "Faces of Freedom Summer" by Herbert Randall.

In 1964, Randall, a young African American and Native American photographer, won a fellowship to spend a year documenting contemporary Negro life. Randall used his fellowship to document the activities of Freedom Summer, a wide-scale volunteer voter registration and educational effort that civil rights activists organized and college students implemented. Because Miami University was one of the training sites for Freedom Summer volunteers, the topic has special significance at our institution.

Beyond the historical connection was the meaning that this particular collection of artworks could hold for a class of future educators. All the students in this particular semester's class aspired to become educators, and many intended to pursue work as student affairs professionals. An exhibit of portraits of activism by college students was ripe with potential connections. For teaching purposes, a meaningful aesthetic experience is one that identifies such potential connections and can be set up through museum exhibits, art studios, and a variety of other venues.

A successful aesthetic experience is one that helps

Making sense of one's life through the learning of a vocation is the educational journey that many of our students should be taking.

students take in, and go out to, the work of art. “Perceiving is an active probing of wholes as they become visible,” according to Maxine Greene (p. 13). To help students take in and reach out to “Faces of Freedom Summer,” we assigned reading from the Nussbaum text before class, focusing on chapters on the moral imagination and the cultivation of compassion. We began the class session, held at the Miami Art Museum, with a brief test. The test was an abbreviated version of the voter registration tests black voters in many Southern states had to pass before being allowed to register to vote during the Jim Crow era. The test’s difficulty astounded seminar participants: not a single student passed the test. At this point, we discussed the purpose of the test and how it functioned to keep blacks away from the voting booth. The museum educator then discussed the exhibit in very general terms and introduced a short film that provided a historical context for Freedom Summer. The film gave students a sense of the importance and impact of these activities, lending a greater understanding of the content of the photographs they were about to view.

We then invited students to immerse themselves in the exhibit and provided them ample time to explore each photograph. Each student was asked to select one photograph on which to focus sustained attention. They were then to write about that piece: its composition, visual features, effects, and emotional impact. Following this reflection on a single photograph, we asked students to write responses to a series of questions that explored connections between the photographs and the concepts introduced in the Nussbaum text, such as compassion and justice. The class discussion that immediately followed was a forum for seminar participants to share their perceptions of the art and to enlarge those perceptions by listening to how peers made sense of them.

Students first shared their emotional responses to the photographs, which included portraits of important activists in the movement and of real people suffering through extreme injustice and physical torment, as well as moving representations of courage and dignity exhibited by both the Freedom Summer volunteers and the black activists and voters. The photographs are emotionally stirring, and students took a great deal of time detailing their emotions, how the photographs connected with their personal life, and what bearing they had on their moral choices and professional future.

A question emerged from the discussion that disturbed many seminar participants: “Would I have been one of the people participating in Freedom Summer, or would I have been one of the members of the KKK?” In other words, this white student was asking herself and others, “Which side of this moral question would I have

stood on?” One student’s self-reflective question became the focus of conversation and evoked an honest, risky, and soul-searching discussion about moral commitments and the boundaries of our social and historical contexts. Where would we have stood in this fight? Where do we stand now on current questions of right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust? And where did the Freedom Summer volunteers and civil rights activists summon the courage to take the stand they did?

Several days later, I asked students to post their reflections on our Freedom Summer experience on our Web-based discussion board. Several days after the experience, some students indicated that they had begun to integrate their reactions to the photographs with their identities as humans and future educators. For example, the student who posed the question, “Which side would I have stood on in this battle?” contributed this statement:

In viewing the images . . . I began to see the world in a new way. Of course I felt compassion for the people in the prints and rightfully so. I felt their fight, and was engaged in their struggle. However, through my moral perception and the judgment of similar possibilities, I came to the realization that I may NOT be the one in the photos, but that, due to the place and the time, I may actually be the one causing the oppression of the people that we saw. This is not an easy idea to deal with—but it helped me replace old feelings of hatred and contempt for the oppressors with feelings of compassion and understanding—because I see now that many times we eliminate our opportunity to become world citizens by ignorantly engaging in the perpetuation of cultural norms. They were only hurting themselves in the end—the oppressors—but they could not see that. I could have been one of them, and how truly sad that would have been. [European American female second-year graduate student]

This student articulated the uncomfortable truth that this aesthetic experience exposed: we are moral actors in historical moments, and our own commitments fall short of our idealized version of our best self. Knowledge of self and expansion of moral viewpoints are essential to the work of education and are central to unlocking full knowledge of one’s personal power and agency as an educator. Moreover, knowing the privilege and limitations of one’s particular cultural identity is an essential step toward serving others and engaging in equitable, transformative educational experiences.

Another student explored the notion of compassion in her reflection on the aesthetic experience:

Viewing “Faces of Freedom Summer” proved to be one of the most emotional, moving, and thought changing experiences I have ever had. After visiting a concentration camp in Germany during my junior year at [college], I did not believe I would ever experience such intense emotions, namely compassion, for individuals I did not know. However, this exhibit did awaken many emotions inside me. It did so because of Nussbaum’s third judgment, the “judgment of similar possibilities.” In viewing this exhibit, I experienced it very differently because I am dating an African American. Previously, I could view this exhibit from the White perspective, hoping that I would be a participant in Freedom Summer. However, now I view this exhibit from the lenses of someone who cares about an individual who could have been the victim of such oppression. . . . Viewing this exhibit from this new vantage point severely changed the way I viewed this exhibit and my relation to it. Now, my position is no longer abstract but a real possibility for those I care deeply about. This experience has prompted me to consider how we as educators can facilitate the “judgment of similar possibilities” for our students because of the powerful effects it can have on students and individuals in general. [European American female second-year master’s student]

When I asked students to post their reflections on the online discussion board, I requested that they comment on their own reactions and interpretations of the art and on their views on the role of the arts in educating students in general. In this way, students reflected on their own questions, commitments, and purposes and extended these questions into their future interactions with the students with whom they will be working. Who will we be, as educators? The exhibit and their reflections allowed students to place their own life and their profession into a historical context and imagine what the future might hold. One student expressed the humility and hope that she felt in comparing her own life with the lives depicted in the photographs:

In regards to the “Freedom Summer” exhibit, viewing those photos reminded me of the struggles individuals have persevered through.

Those photos spoke to me about the resiliency of the human spirit and the leaps and bounds a society can make when we work together. It makes me recognize the impact one person or a group of people can have on society. In addition, it also reminds me that while it seems like change rarely occurs, we truly can make dramatic changes in just a short period of time. More than anything, the photos made me stop and think about how trivial many of my concerns are. I often find myself stressed over the amount of reading I have or an inconvenience I experience during my day at the dining hall or trying to find a parking spot. However, when viewing those photos and recognizing the true struggles these individuals endured and their abilities to push through and never give up, it encourages me to really step back and recognize what matters in life. Are my daily ‘irks’ really worth getting upset about? Or can I use that energy on something more important and meaningful? [European American female second-year graduate student]

“What sort of life am I creating?” is a much larger question than “What kind of paid work do I want to learn how to do?” It is a question of great interest to adults of all ages and in particular to young adults just starting out. “How do I make a meaningful life, both through my professional work and in my own everyday moral actions?” is a question at the heart of a vocational education. Work must be part of a larger existence that is purposefully lived. An experience with art can motivate this questioning because the arts can stir us, trouble us, and transport us in ways that few other teaching media can. However, the arts do not simply or inherently contain pedagogical moments or miracles. The role of the educator is to carefully construct experiences with art to involve a range of reflective and dialogical activities that will promote imagining, integrating, and consolidating meaning.

Because experiences with the arts have the potential to bring vivid personal and social meaning to questions that include “Who am I?” and “Who do I wish to become?” students can place their vocational goals within larger questions of purpose. By reframing assumptions that attending college is preparation for the world of work, experiences with art help place the more technical, instrumental thinking about work aside for more holistic and moral thinking about what kind of professional and personal life one wishes to lead. Such retooling of educational aims brings us to new notions of vocational education.

# To experience art is to experiment, to undergo an encounter that breaks the routine of habit and mundane ways of seeing and living every day.

## WORK AND PURPOSE

IT IS A PARTICULARLY AMERICAN assumption that we are our work. Americans work more and vacation less than most comparable Westernized societies; Americans seem to live for the job. Such cultural constructions belie the complexity and reality of what it means to live a life, in the United States or anywhere else. Ask any college student or recent college graduate what it means to live a rich, fulfilling life, and you'll receive a suitably wide range of responses. A happy family life. Joyful and nurturing relationships. Fulfilling and fairly compensated work. A sense of peace and spiritual well-being. Meaningful commitments to important organizations, causes, or institutions. And of course, a steady supply of fun, pleasure, color, and excitement. No doubt, work is an important part of life but by no means the sole component. Our students know this, and we know this, too.

Because higher education has become so obsessed with fulfilling vocational aims, our larger and collective sense of education is faltering. Students who enroll in college with the focused aim of being an accountant, teacher, or speech pathologist seek knowledge to build a meaningful life, but if we teach subjects like business, education, or speech pathology as skills, techniques, or mere methods to professional ends, we fail to provide a meaningful education. John Dewey wrote in *Democracy and Education* that there is "a tendency for every distinctive vocation to become too dominant, too exclusive and absorbing in its specialized aspect. This means emphasis upon skill or technical method at the expense of meaning" (p. 308). Dewey called such an emphasis "trade education," or "vocational training," something that has its place in specialized trade schools but is not the exclusive role of colleges and universities. What conditions can make higher education distinct from a trade school?

The answer lies in the definition of *vocation* offered by Dewey: "A vocation signifies any form of continuous activity which renders service to others and engages personal powers in behalf of the accomplishment of results" (p. 319). A vocational education realizes that being an accountant or an educator is not a job but a continual and changing set of activities, involving forms

of specialized and general thinking that must adapt over time. A vocational education is one that fully inquires into what it means to serve others, investigating historical, philosophical, and anthropological questions about human relations. A vocational education releases and develops students' abilities, what Dewey called "personal powers," toward the ends of work. Such powers would include many capacities beyond the ability to balance the books or the ability to fairly discipline a student.

Vocational education is more than trade education if we teach a sense of historical, political, cultural, and ethical context for the occupation. Engaging in, for example, accountancy as a "continuous activity over time" means that we understand the historical underpinnings of the occupation, the cultural conditions in which the occupation is set, and the current pressures (political, economic, social, and so on) that affect its current practice. Vocational education is more than trade education if we fully explore the questions surrounding what it means to serve others, whether through studies of cultures, literature, philosophy, poetry, the arts, or similar humanistic inquiry. Finally, vocational education is more than trade education if we focus on developing students' personal powers in holistic ways, engaging their full energies and unique capacities toward their chosen occupation. The result of such education is transformative. Dewey argued that teachers who bring their full personal powers to education will not simply teach within the confines of the occupation as it is now structured but will bring human creativity and agency to making the profession distinctive and renewing it with each generation.

Vocational education cannot ignore larger questions of context, culture, ethics, and politics, nor should it evade students' existential questions. Indeed, questions of purpose, meaning, and identity are central to what it means to occupy a vocation. The journey to becoming a professional is the journey of building one's life, with particular but by no means exclusive focus on one part of that life (the paid work). Making sense of one's life through the learning of a vocation is the educational journey that many of our students should be taking. It is not as if a student decides to become an accountant and explores questions of meaning, value, and purpose outside of those occupational parameters. One's values and sense of pur-

pose shape occupational choice, and one's occupational directions in turn shape interest and values. Vocational education is a transactive experience. To ignore this is to strip higher education of its liberal, and liberating, potential.

Dewey's definition of *vocational education* implies not a continued segregation of liberal education from vocational education but a recognition of their interdependency. The students who experienced the Freedom Summer exhibit were engaged in learning about both how to become an educator and how to become a compassionate and fair person. Their struggles over meanings of compassion and justice were emotional and personal and simultaneously detached and reflectively professional in some ways. The arts facilitate the connections between liberal and vocational, personal and professional, because they cross multiple disciplines, domains, and histories.

Dewey's view of vocational education calls us to soften the hardened categories of liberal education and vocational or professional education in higher education. Liberal education should become more vocationalized in the sense that liberal education should have social relevance and purposes in mind. Vocational education should be liberalized in that any vocational course of study should have larger, holistic humanist aims and purposes in mind. I do not believe that only philosophers, poets, or religious studies professors can help students explore questions of meaning and purpose; neither do I believe that only accountants can help students learn about how best to fairly and competently work with financial clients. We need specialists, but our pedagogical purposes intertwine and expand beyond our specialties.

## CAVEATS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

QUESTIONS OF MEANING, purpose, and values do not belong to any one discipline; while these questions should be the focus of certain specialized courses in philosophy, ethics, or similar disciplines, they are questions embedded in the educational journey of all college students. They are questions that cross the vocational-liberal divide that currently exists in our educational thinking. They are questions that, if understood and pedagogically addressed, can make all education, especially vocational education, much more meaningful and transformative.

Liberalizing the current technical, instrumental forms of vocational education requires a great deal from faculty. Many students enrolled in my class were members of an academic program that places a high value on building community, risk taking, dialogical learning, and incorporating students' whole selves into the learning process. Thus, many students in the class were adept and ready to

address questions of meaning and purpose through reflection and dialogue with their peers. Certainly, not all students have had experiences with such environments, and constructing these environments across our campuses will require time, commitment, and resources. But we can all start somewhere, and many campuses and programs are exemplars in this work. Finally, restructuring programs to balance technical, specialized vocational education with the broader, more liberal aims in vocational education may require relinquishing cherished courses or content in favor of different courses and content of a less specialized and technical nature.

Higher education is, among many other things, a preparation ground for the world of paid work. To prepare our students for that world, we must not handicap them with a technical and narrow sense of their future vocation. Rather, in helping them to explore connections between their work and the larger questions of life involving meaning, purpose, and values, we can educate rather than train—and thus enhance their entire growth and development rather than simply the aspects directly related to a specific vocation. The effects will likely result in a greater commitment to and understanding of one's vocation, as one student's remarks following a visit to the art museum suggest:

By placing art—both the creation of and appreciation of—into the curriculum and co-curriculum of higher education, we can engage with students about the humanity that connects us all. What do students feel from the art? What is being communicated about being human? How do we communicate those same sentiments now? What do we do with our lives today that is for a higher purpose, that is done because we cannot not do it by the dictates of our convictions? What great questions to pose to students!

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