

# Notes on my philosophy of education

Larry Olds, 1973

The following chart presents a view of how I look at some of the philosophical questions relating to education and schooling. The chart presents some of the critical aspects that educators must address. It is not meant to be comprehensive. But rather to indicate how I view education. I identify myself with the Education for Liberation column.

In creating the chart in dialectical form I have imagined traditional education to be the thesis, the free school or humanistic education to be the antithesis, and an education for liberation to represent the synthesis. This necessarily simplifies since the term traditional education covers a wide range of practices and theories with many internal contradictions and inconsistencies. In using a dialectical form for this statement I imply that I'm trying to make my thought/ theory and practices dialectical. Further that it is to be understood that this is a continuous process, the synthesis reappears as a thesis to be negated and re-synthesized.

	Traditional Education	Free Schools or humanistic education	Education for Liberation
Knowledge	nature revealed; facts information; that which is repetitive, objective, owned by authority	inner experience of self awareness; subjective; personally valued and relative, owned by self	products of peoples interactions with their environments; as considerations, contextually objective, that appear as problems
Use of Knowledge	to control and manipulate	to clarify	for liberation; to transcend current material circumstance
Nature of People	individual beings, often inherently bad some better	individual beings, inherently good, everyone valued-	individual and collective beings in dialectic relation with the world, capable of creating and recreating
Concept of Learning	banking concept; deposits	learning through activities; learning is experience; organic growth	praxis; development of critical consciousness
Growth	acquisition of knowledge skills	maturation, natural development or unfolding of intrinsic knowledge and goodness	development, interaction with environment that in active within
Role of Teachers	depositor of knowledge actor, evaluator, judge claiming ethical neutrality	facilitator, helper; ethically neutral	engaged with students; owner of a point of view; interpreter of experiences/words/event with others
Meaning of Freedom	absence of restraint; references the individual earned through responsibility; given by others	Absence of restraint; do your own thing located in the individual; a natural quality of people	located in concrete circumstances; in terms of action; maximizes both individual and collective action; has little power to explain

			separate from concepts like oppression, choice, domination
Practice; Theory	Emphasis on theory by 1) focus on a priori goal 2) <i>traditional</i> academic practices of reading, papers, 3) use of technological rationale for educational planning; chance relationship between the two'	emphasis on practice and experiential learning; theorizing is a private matter	theory is interpretation of practice that in turn informs further practice; use of other planning models; praxis; inseparably related
Ends: Means	serial separation of ends and means through use of tech. rationale; focus on knownness; ends determined by planners/actors/teachers	ends determined by students; continued separation of ends and means; use of tech. rationale by students focus on knownness	emerge simultaneously in action; models that separate them are of limited use; unknownness; ends as mediators (means)
Meaning of Choice	not problematic, not developmental; equated with selection from alternatives; an individual phenomena; made by teachers	choice and whim equated; made by students; not problematic or developmental; more dimensions of choice allowed; selection by individuals	choosing thought to be problematic; collective choice with oppressed; connected to purposes and interests
Interests Served	Owning class; status quo; domination	owning class; pacification; status quo; in a material sense those of the middle (managerial) class	liberation for working and oppressed classes; authentic interests of all people
Program Content of Education	cultural traditions; determined by teachers; known in advance; knowledge, facts, concepts; priority on substance	whatever anyone wants or whims; intrinsic in people; development of self; process is all that is important; emphasis on procedure and form	a product of interaction; drawn from the environment that is active within students together with teachers; purpose is participation in making of the world; integration of concern for form and substance
Self Critical Reflection	Not present; eliminated by planning model and conceptual models	not present; acceptance of everything	shared by all; central to the theory and practice of education

My involvement with alternative education institutions is best summarized by my resume submitted earlier with my letter of interest in the positions. I'd like to share more of the meaning of some of that experience by writing briefly about The Laurel House and the Community school, two alternative institutions that helped shape my thinking about collectivity, social change and political action.

The Community School was a small private high school begun in St Paul in 1970, by a group of us who for the most part lived together in the Laurel House in St Paul. We moved in together two months before the school opened in the fall. Our vision was of an intentional community seeking to integrate our working and our living. It was important because it was a serious attempt to create a non-alienating existence. It remains one of the few times that I have worked seriously with others.

My memories of those times feel very good. It was a time of growth and expanded consciousness. The introduction that the two experiences provided in consensus decision making coincided with my work at the University of Minnesota with teachers in training toward the building of group skills, what I call collective-colleague building skills. The encounter style of meeting and interaction that we practiced at home and to a lesser extent in the school paralleled my work with education students on communication skills, workshop formats, and human relations programs. I value the skills I gained and feel good about the resolution of the conflicts that eventually led to the demise of the house and the withdrawal by all of us from the school.

There were disappointments too; the shattering of a dream, but as the parts of the dream have fallen I've seen them to be a mirror. What we thought was a new vision and were new practices were in many ways simply a reflection of the old. We saw ourselves as building new and alternative institutions and in so doing abandoning the old, the new would remain when the old crumbled around us. We sought to develop a new infrastructure of society, but in the posing of the task we terminated the dialectic. Our focusing on the image in the mirror made us inner directed in a way that placed us in a benign pasture with respect to the oppressive forces in our society. We were insulated from these forces by our own practices, but also by our own privileged position; a position granted us by both our own class roots and by our achievements in school.

In short we separated ourselves from the larger social movements of our time and thought we were those larger social movements. We remained aloof and separate from our own history and the historic struggles for justice, equity, and the sharing in the creation of culture. In the end we were unable to wrench our practice from its roots in an ideology of individualism, in fact saw little need to do so. The juxtaposing of a radical vision with practices of individualism wasn't enough. It functioned to leave unthreatened oppressive forces because it made collective power only a tool to facilitate individual growth.

It has been helpful to me to see those endeavors in terms of our own class interests; also in terms of our well schooled roles as a managerial class and the function such a class plays in maintaining the status quo. I now understand that earlier movement as a bourgeois movement by a relatively privileged caretaker class for itself.

In summary, there are two important things that I learned in the past six years at involvement with alternative institutions. The first is the communication skills, my collectivity/colleague building skills. I have some ideas and knowledge about concrete practices that can help make working collectively possible.

The second thing that I learned is the necessity to locate education work in the larger social and political struggles and knowledge of some of the ways we have been kept out of those struggles. Alternative schools, including higher education ones, will not change society in themselves. Seeing them as doing so has kept us from understanding the authentic role that they can play. Moreover, it kept us from analyzing the part alternative institution can play, an analysis that would demand that we understand the roles and functions of schools, the society as a whole (including the particularities and the 'historic movements of which we would become part.