

Article

Beyond Profession: On the Liberal Arts Value of Pedagogy

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Abstract: The liberal arts value of pedagogy has not been recognized by the public, only a very small number of scholars are aware of it, but that does not mean it is unimportant. Whether as educators or learners, everyone has the need for growth and development. The key to growth lies not in the breadth of knowledge, but in its interdisciplinary nature. The discipline of education serves as an important vehicle for helping people achieve this growth. Some Chinese pedagogy researchers argued that education should be made accessible to all-an inherent disciplinary characteristic of pedagogy itself that highlights the inherently interdisciplinary nature of pedagogy itself. This paper endorses this view and further elaborates on the liberal arts character of pedagogy, arguing that its reflective experience, educational thinking, and growth-oriented values can help learners develop a holistic understanding of themselves, others, and the world. However, instrumental rationality has constrained the disciplinary development of pedagogy; consequently, institutions engaged in pedagogical research must engage in disciplinary reflection and adjustment regarding curricular logic, pedagogical approaches, and educational spaces to fully leverage pedagogy's role in cultivating individuals' liberal arts literacy.

Keywords: Pedagogy; Liberal arts education; The liberal arts value of pedagogy

1. Introduction

Since pedagogy started to develop independently, it has had to face the problem of forming a discipline. Johann Friedrich Herbart (known as "the father of scientific pedagogy") hoped to provide a theoretical basis for education through "scientific pedagogy" so that people could better understand and implement education; however, a century later, the place of pedagogy in academia remains unclear-it does not have the long-standing metaphysical tradition of philosophy, nor does it have the clear methodological boundaries of sociology and psychology. At the same time, by combining the speculative paradigm of philosophy with the empirical paradigms of sociology and psychology in its disciplinary research, it has also increased the ambiguity of its disciplinary boundaries. To meet the demands of educational modernization, discussions on the disciplinary nature of Chinese pedagogy have often been limited to the scope of teacher education and vocational training. This has led to the disciplinary function of pedagogy being reduced to the vocational training of "teacher preparation", blurring the boundaries between academic and vocational disciplines [1]. At the same time, it has also reduced the humanistic and academic value of pedagogy. For a long time, the disciplinary discussions in Chinese pedagogy have been somewhat isolated and distant; teachers with long roots in basic education and practical pedagogical wisdom have been on the outside of these discussions. To some extent, Chinese pedagogy has lacked dialogue, exchange and integration among different subjects and views [2]. Consequently, the professional and insular nature of education has led to a gradual decline in its social standing in Chinese society and has, in turn, imperceptibly restricted the intellectual horizons of the discipline.

With the rapid development of the economy, society, and technology, the scope of education has continually expanded, shifting people's thinking about education from "education by others" to "self-education". People have begun to independently consider

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"how to educate themselves", no longer passively relying on the discipline imposed by external others. When society's education is no longer confined within school walls, and when every citizen continuously generates a need for self-education within the context of lifelong learning, the question of "how to understand education" naturally arises. When teachers need pedagogy, the public needs pedagogy, and every social group, every social role, and every individual needs pedagogy, then pedagogy becomes an essential competency for everyone to understand their own circumstances and participate in public educational life. At this point, the academic community should rethink and explore the value and content dimensions of pedagogy-the discipline of pedagogy must not merely take the form of operational knowledge about school education, but rather a mode of thinking that understands people, relationships, and the process of becoming an adult. This mode of thinking possesses a liberal arts character, as it is directed toward all who care about "how a person becomes a person", not merely those whose profession is education.

2. Theoretical Explanation of the Liberal Arts Value of Pedagogy

2.1. The Connotation of "Liberal Arts Education"

The idea of general education is old, and ancient Greece had a concept called "liberal education"[3]. Aristotle divided the two kinds of education into the education of free men and the training of artisans. He thought that the former aimed to cultivate the virtues and reason of free men, and the latter focused on developing skills for making a living [4]. This difference provided a theoretical basis for education, which is to say, the aim of education is to help individuals become all-around good people, not just to train them for a living. Liberal arts education carries forward the ideals of liberal education but is not the same as it. Liberal arts education is a new form of classical liberal education, and the two are different in terms of educational aims, target groups and contents [5]. Liberal education was clearly hierarchical, and freedom was a right of the ruling class, not a freedom for everyone. Liberal arts education in contemporary society is in line with the spirit of democracy and equality compared to traditional liberal education, so its aim is to serve all people in society. Since all members of society enjoy freedom, the goal of liberal arts education is to promote the freedom of all individuals, and its content focuses on how people can achieve freedom. No single field in the world can boast that it will "help people become free individuals". What makes a person human lies in their ability to continuously be aware of and improve themselves through practical experience in life, and different fields can offer different views of this self-awareness and improvement. Fuadaturrahmah and others (2024) thought that the main points of liberal arts education are to foster values and morality, so that educated people can grow up well-rounded and learn broadly across different fields [6]. In terms of the practical logic of liberal arts education, the broad knowledge acquired through it can help people develop an all-encompassing way of thinking and achieve freedom in their interactions with the world and in social life. Cynthia A.Wells (2015) believes that liberal arts education contains a concept that goes beyond all subjects; that is, education itself has inherent value, empowers individuals, and touches upon various profound meanings that cannot be covered by any single discipline. This is an intentional inclusion; it is understood that the results of liberal arts education can take many forms and are achieved through various educational methods in different environments [7]. Thus, the way liberal arts education helps people achieve freedom is not in the "breadth" or "generality" of knowledge, but in the "interconnectedness" of knowledge. It aims to educate the mind so that people can integrate all kinds of knowledge to gain a comprehensive view of themselves, the world and society, and thereby achieve freedom by living in accordance with social ethics.

2.2. The "Liberal Arts" Nature of Pedagogy

Few scholars have studied the idea of "pedagogy having liberal arts characteristics". Hou Huaiyin put forward the above idea in China [8,9] who proposed that pedagogy should move from "the study of teachers" to "the study for all", and unlike other subjects

with distinct boundaries for knowledge, pedagogy deals with the universal question of "how to be a person". Pedagogical research has continuously focused on the growth activities of all people and is in line with the essential values and aims of liberal arts education.

2.2.1. Pedagogy Involves Reflective Experience

Pedagogy is the reflective on educational practice, so to some extent, pedagogy itself is a form of reflection, and this reflection occurs in and is applied to human life and development. Therefore, pedagogy has the nature of a liberal arts course and is open to everyone. In studying pedagogy, people gain not only general ideas but also develop a growth-oriented attitude and habits; that is, they can keep track of their own behaviour, anticipate what will happen in their actions beforehand, and avoid falling into active "unthinking" or "accomplice" behaviour [10]. In the traditional understanding, premiss-based reflection on one's own behavior is a requirement exclusive to teachers, leading to a peculiar educational phenomenon in society: when educational problems arise, only teachers are expected to reflect and take responsibility, while other stakeholders—such as parents, relevant educational administrators, and students—remain on the sidelines. In reality, however, every conscious individual in society needs to cultivate this mindset of anticipatory reflection through the study of pedagogy. Only then, when educational problems and conflicts arise, will all relevant stakeholders share a unified direction for resolving them.

2.2.2. Pedagogy Cultivates Educational Thinking

Educational thinking refers to approaching any human activity from an educational perspective—asking questions such as: What impact does this have on the participants? Is it helping people? Which aspects of human development does it promote? Whether considering John Dewey's view that "education is growth"[11] or Confucius's assertion that "education is about helping people become fully realized individuals"[12] (defined as achieving holistic development in wisdom, morality, courage, and practical capability), educational thought has always placed human growth at its center. This mindset should not be the exclusive domain of teachers; everyone can—and ought to—learn it. Because it is accessible to all, educational thinking should not be confined to formal schooling, but should extend to all aspects of life and social relations. Anyone who asks, "What does this mean for me and others?" or "What kind of person will I—or will we—become?" is engaging in educational thinking. In this way, it provides everyone with a cognitive framework to understand their personal growth, the development of others, and broader changes in society.

2.2.3. Pedagogy Pursues the Value of Human Maturity

The humanistic ideals of education are to foster all-around development of people. Education is different from training in that it aims to all-round develop the person; training focuses on improving certain abilities or skills. Everyone needs to consider how to become a person of substance in their own field of life. Such a question cannot and will not be solved by simply improving or strengthening specific abilities and skills; rather, it depends on a person's "wholeness"—that is to say, the interdependence and construction of all parts in one's habits, character, mind, and relationships. By learning some skills, people can obtain the necessary tools and resources for making a living in a competitive society; at the same time, we must also consider the quality of life, which encompasses more than just livelihood. Many people have gained a large sum of money and a good life, but they are still unhappy and have never experienced genuine joy; this shows that they have failed to obtain the will to live. This ability is to pursue human values, to become a person, rather than to be a tool. Therefore, the educational value of "becoming a person" is in line with the value pursuit of liberal arts education; both aim to help individuals build a comprehensive spiritual world beyond professional survival and become fully realized people.

3. Practical Dilemmas Facing the Value of Liberal Arts in Education

3.1. Instrumental Rationality Has Squeezed the Value Space of Pedagogy

With the development of modern education, instrumental rationality has been spreading widely, reducing the value space of educational research and pushing its reflective, educational and humanistic values outside the scope of educational evaluation. With the technicisation of education, the standards for educational evaluation have gradually shifted to "efficiency first"; as a result, administrative operations in education have begun to displace its educational purposes, quantitative indicators have reduced the scope of education, and technological dependence has obscured the inherent value of individuals. Under the dominance of instrumental rationality, various educational practices have caused people's reflection on education to gradually move away from the essential problems of educational goals and relationships among people.

3.2. Professionalization Narrows the Scope of Pedagogy's Object of Study

As a result of the professionalisation of pedagogy, although the scientific rationality of the discipline has improved, some sacrifices have also been made. In order to set up its own scientific boundary amidst disciplinary competition, pedagogy has continuously narrowed the scope of its subject matter, reducing it from the broad range of sociocultural activities in education itself to the narrow area of "school education". Therefore, even teachers who have received special training in education are limited in their understanding of education to the scope of school education. Although the narrowing of the scope of study for pedagogy has promoted the practicality of education and allowed for the rapid cultivation of a group of skilled teachers, it has also moved pedagogy away from real-life educational problems. As a result, teachers' teaching practices have become increasingly standardised and lost their original quality as a way to educate students. Furthermore, with the development of various sub-fields under the professionalisation of pedagogy, there has been a trend towards intellectual isolation and difficulty in integrating educational philosophy, the sociology of education, educational psychology, and curriculum and instruction. Due to the division of disciplines, there are many one-sided studies of educational issues and thus no all-encompassing perspective.

3.3. The Curriculum Structure Has Diluted the Content of Educational Studies

Educational theory is generally included in the curriculum of teacher education as theoretical knowledge and is presented in specific courses such as Principles of Education, Educational Psychology and Research Methods in Education. The mode of knowledge transmission in teaching these courses also limits the development of reflective thinking for future teachers. At the same time, the general education curriculum system for fostering interdisciplinary capabilities mainly includes courses in literature, art, history, natural sciences and philosophy, and seldom covers educational theory. As a result, both in the teacher education curriculum and the general education curriculum, the course forms are extremely one-dimensional, dominated by theoretical knowledge and lacking practical knowledge; therefore, it is difficult to realize the reflective and integrative nature of pedagogy. On the one hand, students in teacher education programs are only exposed to abstract knowledge in theory and are therefore likely to be focused on exams. Therefore, they fail to grasp the concept of teaching for critical thinking development among students and cannot effectively apply it in their work. At the same time, students in non-teacher education majors, although they may want to apply pedagogical thinking to reflect on their own growth, often do not have appropriate courses for this purpose.

4. Practical Pathways for the Liberal Arts Value of Pedagogy

4.1. Reconstructing the Curricular Logic of Pedagogy

To achieve the liberal arts spirit in pedagogy, the content should strengthen the link between people and educational problems, as well as the link between values and educational values. Traditionally, the curriculum logic of pedagogy has been regarded as merely a type of disciplinary knowledge for vocational education and has failed to

recognise its inherent curricular value in cultivating all-encompassing and harmonious understanding of oneself, others, and the world. Thus, the curricular logic of pedagogy should go beyond the boundaries of vocational education. First, scholars of education need to break away from the narrow focus of their own research areas and pay more attention to the problem of all-around development for all children. By combining other subjects, such as philosophy, sociology and psychology, one can expand and integrate the ideas on the factors affecting human development. Second, higher education institutions at all levels and of all kinds should strive to integrate pedagogy into the general education curriculum system and research and develop a pedagogical content system that transcends vocational boundaries—that is to say, create a set of pedagogical concepts accessible to the general public to guide every learner in developing an understanding of and engaging in the practice of "how to become a fully realized person".

4.2. Innovating the Teaching Methods in Pedagogy

As for how to teach, the reflective and educational qualities of pedagogy as a general education subject cannot be realised through simple transmission of knowledge. Therefore, to realise the general education values of pedagogy, we need to change our teaching methods to focus on dialogue and reflection. Dialogic teaching is a kind of interaction that is democratic, open-minded and tentative. In dialogue, people not only present their own ideas but also learn to hear about others' lives, question their own ideas, and gain knowledge by discussing differences. Reflective teaching, on the other hand, is a type of education that encourages people to think about the reasons behind their own changes in life. It can help people break free from the inertia of "taken-for-granted" thinking and re-evaluate the values and development logic of educational activities. Therefore, in the context of liberal arts education, teaching can be based on real educational problems, such as personal development, hot topics in public education and actual educational contradictions, to engage students in dialogue and reflection.

4.3. Expanding the Educational Space of Pedagogy

Pedagogy needs to break free from the space of schools and move into the wider public sphere. Education should not be limited to the institutions of vocational education; it needs to be integrated into public culture. Thus, to realise the liberal arts value of pedagogy, it is necessary to promote its application in daily life so that more people can experience and understand the core and goals of education. First is the integration of educational content in daily life. Those in power, such as the government and educational research institutions, can change the division of labour to turn educational theory from a specialized area into practical knowledge for the masses. Second, there is the assimilation of teaching ideas in daily life. By altering the presentation of specialised pedagogical knowledge—moving away from technical academic language and using expressions that resonate with the lives of ordinary people—and integrating pedagogical ways of thinking into the daily lives of ordinary people, such as parenting and self-improvement, we can help the public build an all-encompassing cognitive system for education and make reasonable decisions in real-life educational situations.

5. Conclusion

In short, the liberal arts spirit in education should be promoted. But it is not an easy one. To build a new form of education beyond vocational training, we need to rethink what education is all about. The reflective experience, educational thinking and values of growth in pedagogy determine that it naturally has the nature of a liberal arts subject. A re-examination of pedagogy's liberal arts values is needed to ensure the survival and development of the discipline, and to help each person achieve self-knowledge and live a high-quality life in society. Instrumental rationality has reduced pedagogy to the liberal-arts function. However, instrumental rationality has obscured the general educational value of pedagogy. To break through the current predicament of narrowed value spaces, subject categories, and content structures in pedagogy—in addition to the proposal made in this paper that relevant government and educational research institutions rethink the

disciplinary institutional framework of pedagogy from the three perspectives of curricular logic, teaching methods, and educational spaces-it is even more imperative to overcome the barriers to interdisciplinary and intersubjective dialogue in order to broaden the value horizon of pedagogy.

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