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My Personal Pursuit of Knowledge

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EAD 800 Educational Inquiry, Interpretations and Criticisms

Michigan State University

February 6, 2009

## My Personal Pursuit of Knowledge

As I reflect over my life experience related to education and the process of becoming aware, it has been quite interesting to realize my motivation for becoming “educated.” What is education and how does one achieve it? In my family, one is considered to be educated after the completion of undergraduate studies. Therefore, the determining factor of classifying a person as educated or not correlates with whether the person is a college graduate. Yet, being a college graduate alone is not sufficient. In my background, the economic prosperity associated with obtaining a college degree is the over-riding motivational factor of becoming educated.

My parents insisted I attend college, not for intellectual development, but as a means to achieving economic self-sufficiency. In other words, becoming educated has been more about developing skills and knowledge to become gainfully employed rather than for the value of learning. The premise is that a college degree is the gateway to the economic middle class and experiencing life without the financial constraints of not being able to afford a suburban home and at least two cars. I do not know if I subscribe to this ideology, but it has been quite formative in my development. This notion of education is so deeply entrenched in my value system and has been the underlying theme to most of my key life decisions.

For example, as an undergraduate student I majored in International Business and Spanish because of my passion for travelling and interest in business. My rationale behind this decision was to pursue my natural interest as a possible career field. Also, the Hispanic population in the United States was expected to increase dramatically and there would be need for people to communicate with Spanish speakers. My perception of education as a tool to gain economic self-sufficiency influenced my decision making, because I was confident that if I learned Spanish I would increase my earning potential. Now that I am aware of my educational

motivation, I also realize that my decision to study abroad was not entirely based on my interest in culture and language immersion. Studying in Spain was also a strategy to position myself for appropriate job opportunities, such as translating or leading international development projects in Latin America.

Viewing education as economic functionality has both societal and individual benefits. Educational institutions are continually tasked with developing the manpower needed for society to function in terms of producing individuals with the appropriate skill set. However, only viewing education through the lens of economic development does not consider the intellectual development function of education.

Alternative views on the function of education suggest that the purpose of education is to develop the mind and the self-actualization, enabling one to reach his full potential. At Morehouse College in 1948 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. proposed that “the function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically...Intelligence plus character-that is the goal of true education” (Sankar, 2004, p. 128). A contrasting opinion of education is reflected by Grayson Kirk, who stated, “the most important function of education at any level is to develop the personality of the individual and the significance of his life to himself and to others. This is the basic architecture of a life; the rest is ornamentation and decoration of the structure” (Sankar, 2004, p. 128). Both authors advocate for the process of development and change to occur, but focus on different aspects of the individual. If Dr. King’s assertion holds true then the epistemological development of an individual becomes a priority. The manner in which individuals come into knowing requires an active level of questioning and reasoning, which I define as inquiry. It is also the mechanism that allows learning to manifest, despite varying opinions regarding the function of education. The inquiry process involves the art of questioning

and evaluating events and phenomena. Utilizing questions in the investigation process increases the value of the experience and enables the inquirer to learn what he or she wants to know (Boyles, 2006, p.62). Furthermore, I would conclude that the inquiry process is subjective and can be influenced by an individual's prior experience and occurrences in the external environment. The conclusion reached at the end of inquiry process is the formation of knowledge.

In the article, "It's Your World, I'm Just Trying to Explain it: Understanding Our Epistemological and Methodological Differences", Gloria Ladson-Billings examines media rhetoric regarding the September 11, Terrorists Attacks, highlighting the influence of external forces on an individual's epistemological developments amplifying the need for personal inquiry. A re-conceptualization of humanity is an emerging theme of Ladson-Billings examination of the trade attacks. The author called my attention to question how my view of humanity changed and humanitarian acts demonstrated in my environment. I do believe there was a shift in society, but not in on my campus, which was my environment at the time.

Historical events such as September 11 have the ability to catapult or destroy ideas and social agendas and present future ways of being. Most recently, President Barack Obama's nomination, election and inaugural address placed me in a space of inquiry as described above. The American ethos of opportunity became evident when President Obama was elected. His victory attests to the progression of race relations in America; nevertheless, I am curious about how it will characterize the future of social justice. Redefining humanity emerged as a theme of the terrorists attacks, however, the unification of humanity was apparent during President Obama's inaugural address (Ladson-Billings, 2003, p.7). I question his election's further contribution to global humanity and how people will respond to those that are different from

themselves. My inquisitive state of being has given me the permission to draw the conclusion that authenticity prevails across humanity. As I watched the inaugural address on television and witnessed people across the world focus on the same experience as it occurred, I became convinced that one genuine experience or concept has the ability to supersede differences and create engagement.

Engagement in life's experience is central to identifying truth, which is an aspect of John Dewey's redefinition of epistemology (Boyles, 2003, 7). One cannot pursue inquiry if he/she is not involved. Personally, when I became engaged in my own learning my knowledge retention increased. For example, as high school student I took a civics course and cannot remember most of the content. However, my work as a community organizer improved my understanding of civic responsibility and how it is executed. I gained a greater understanding and appreciation for civics from hands-on experience compared to memorizing and taking examinations at the request of my teacher.

Dewey's work continues to influence contemporary educators, such as bell hooks. In the method of instruction coined by Hooks as Engaged Pedagogy, she declares that the "banking system" of education, which assumes that students' responsibility is to consume information, is ineffective (Hooks, 1994). She proposes that the learner become engaged in the process, similarly to Dewey's assertion, but that the educator instructs from a pedagogy of being connected to students on a level that demonstrates a sense of humanity. Engaged Pedagogy requires that the both students and learners be engaged in education for the mind, body and spirit. As I consider my future as an educator, it is my intent to work both from Dewey's and Hooks' theories of involvement in teaching and learning.

Being involved in the process has lead me to analyze my perceptions according to an ontological perspective, by asking myself what has allowed me to reach conclusions about my environment and identify my principle concepts. Earlier, I mentioned that my economic background shaped my view that the sole purpose of education is to provide opportunities for economic prosperity. Although I still think this is one aspect of the function of education, I amended that concept to include the idea that education should also promote understanding of self, social responsibility, and cultural competence. For individuals participating in formal education programs at any level, the educational institution is responsible for creating an environment that allows a person to gain a better understanding of his/her socialization process. By socialization, I am referring to the messages people receive throughout their life-span about their own identity. I believe that educational institutions should seek to foster a sense of ethical behavior among students. As our society is presented with more perplexing scenarios such as September 11, educational institutions have the obligation to create experiences for students to develop their own assessment of morality and ethical behavior. As the impacts of globalization become me paramount in communication and the daily order of doing things, the need for understanding across cultural divides will become more useful.

The overall theme and learning point is that knowledge formation and retention is indicative of the individual's environment and ability to inquire. Inquiry is the entrance point of raising new questions, exploring uncharted possibilities, and reexamining old problems with fresh perspective and moving forward on complex educational issues that lie dormant. I have come to realize this through my own experience. In the past, I have learned more about myself through the process of accomplishing a task more than the end product itself. In order to position myself to winnow my knowledge of education, I will be accessible, open to new thoughts, learn

for the sake of learning, reflect over past experiences, both personal and historical and most of all practice inquiry.

## References

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