**CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHIES OF EDUCATION**

**PERENIALISM**

As you doubtless have surmised, the root word of perennialism is “perennial.” The philosophy of perennialism advances the idea that the focus of education should be the universal truths conveyed through the classic and profound thoughts and works that havelasted through the centuries and have recurred in each generation. Like a perennial plantthat returns year after year, these thoughts and works are everlasting. They have withstood the test of time and are as important and relevant today as they were when first conceived. The enduring wisdom of the past is a guide to the present.

Examples of these classic materials include works of great literature, findings of great scientists, and timeless concepts of history. High school students study Shakespeare’s plays, Homer’s Iliad, Melville’s Moby Dick, Newton’s laws of motion, Einstein’s theories, and other works that have become part of today’s classic repertoire. Students take courses that focus on the traditional subjects of reading, writing, language, mathematics, science, history, and the arts. Elementary and middle school students prepare for more advanced work by studying basic subjects from the perspective of the classic tradition in a tightly controlled and well-disciplined atmosphere. The perennialist believes the emphasis of school should be the mastery of content and the development of reasoning skills in the arts and sciences and that thoughtful consideration of the classical works is the way these goals can be achieved.

Perennialists believe that truth does not depend on time or place but rather is the same for all people. They believe the same curriculum should be required of all students. Their reasoning is twofold: (1) Because the goal of school is to teach the truth, and the truth is the same for everyone, the curriculum must be the same. (2) Because people are born equal and have the same opportunities, to give some students a curriculum that is different from that of others is to treat them differently and is a form of discrimination.

Who decides what should be taught? Society at large makes these decisions because it is society that has validated the importance of these works over time and has continued to hold these classics in high esteem. Many individuals have assembled canons of material they believe should be taught. Noteworthy is Mortimer Adler, whose 1982 work The Paideia Proposal describes a system of education based on the classics. His book has led to the development of an innovative school model called the Paideia (pronounced pyDEE-a) program, which several hundred schools in all grade levels throughout the United States have adopted. The Paideia program calls for all students to study a single rigorous curriculum in which the only elective is foreign language. Teachers in the program use three basic methods of teaching: (1) didactic teaching in which the teacher lectures (10% to 15% of the time), (2) Socratic seminars in which the teacher uses directed questioning to help students arrive at desirable answers (15% to 20% of the time), and (3) coaching in which the teacher coaches students in the academic subjects (60% to 70% of the time) (Brandt & Voke, 2002; National Paideia Center, 2005).

The Socratic method is patterned after the way Socrates taught. He believed people were born with all the information they need in life and that all people were born with the same basic information. This information was already present at birth, but it was hidden. He believed that through skillful question and discussion sessions with students, he was able to get his students to bring this hidden information to the surface.

In the 1930s, Adler and Robert Maynard Hutchins, then president of the University of Chicago, organized the classics into a set of more than 400 works titled Great Books of the Western World (1952), which they believed would enable students to become independent and critical thinkers. They held that People can discover the truths through their senses and their reasoning—that they do not construct truths because they are already in existence. The Great Books of the Western World represent the fruit of these discoveries made by other people; as students read and discuss them, they, too, can encounter the great truths of the universe.

Of course, because the perennialist believes the primary goal of school is for students to learn what others have created and to use this knowledge in their own lives, the teacher is expected to present this material to the students. There is little or no room for students to venture into tangents of their own interest; the curriculum must be covered. The teacher’s role is to impart knowledge. To do this, teachers hold seminars, engage students in Socratic discussions, foster directed readings of great books, explain principles and concepts, and lecture as effectively as possible, presenting dynamic lessons with all the interest-grabbing devices available. The work is demanding, and the classroom is disciplined.

The student’s role is to discuss, examine, and reexamine the information presented by the teacher with the ultimate goal of learning the content.

**ESSENTIALISM**

The philosophy of essentialism takes its name from the word essential. The essentialist believes there are certain basic or essential knowledge, skills, and understandings students should master. Essentialists assert that, over time, society has found that certain skills, such as reading, writing, computing, and, in today’s world, computer skills, are needed for people to function effectively. Accordingly, certain subjects, such as the language arts, mathematics, science, history, and, in today’s world, computer training, are essential for people to gain the knowledge and skills they need. According to the essentialist viewpoint, this knowledge and these skills will always be needed. Thus, we can say that society at large decides in general what these essentials are. Businesses, banks, manufacturers, retailers, and others provide input to the institutions of education, detailing the strengths and weaknesses they see in high school graduates. The educators, in turn, use this input to help them develop programs of study that will prepare students to enter the workforce.

Because most of the people who provide input into the educational system are concerned with students mastering the basic skills of reading, writing, and basic mathematics (the “3 Rs”), the programs developed naturally reflect these concerns. Thus, essentialism can be termed the “Back to Basics” approach to education.

Essentialism has been the guiding philosophy of American education for a very long time. The Soviet launching of Sputnik in October 1957 rekindled this thinking. The United States felt deeply humiliated by the Soviet success. American scientists had been working on launching an American spacecraft for a number of years. Americans asked, “How did this happen? How did the United States, with all its technological capabilities, all its talent, and all its money, not achieve the goal of being first in space?” As so often happens, education took much of the blame.

In essentialist education, students receive instruction in the basic subjects of reading, writing, mathematics, science, history, foreign language, and technology. Unlike perennialism, which emphasizes a canon of great works and classics, essentialism emphasizes fundamental knowledge and skills that business and political leaders believe members of today’s society need to know to be productive in the workplace.

Teachers transmit this essential knowledge and expect students to learn it. The teacher is considered the repository of knowledge to be transmitted. This means educators develop and employ a sequence of topics in each subject that progresses from less complex to more complex material through successive grade levels. It also means using lecture and recitation, discussion, drill and practice, and a variety of teaching and learning materials to ensure that students learn the content. For example, a middle grades social studies teacher might give a lecture on why large cities are located where they are, using maps and videos as aids, rather than having students investigate the phenomenon for themselves by engaging in map exploration activities.

The role of the students is to learn the content and skills being taught and to demonstrate their mastery of them on achievement tests, often in the form of standardized tests that are used to make local, regional, statewide, and national comparisons.

**PROGRESSIVISM**

The educational philosophy of progressivism takes its name from the word progressive. The dictionary defines progressive as “making use of or interested in new ideas, findings, or opportunities” and “. . . an educational theory marked by emphasis on the individual child, informality of classroom procedure, and encouragement of self-expression” (Merriam-Webster, 2003). Thus, the philosophy of progressivism espouses the idea that the focus of education should be students rather than content and that whatever is taught should be meaningful. To the progressivist, the purpose of education is to prepare students to be lifelong learners in an ever-changing society.

One of the key figures in the progressivist movement was John Dewey. Dewey’s writings and his work at the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, where he tested and refined his educational ideas, have produced tremendous innovations in American education. To Dewey, the traditional school where students sat in rows and passively received information imparted by the teacher was ineffective. He argued that if students are to learn, they must be involved with real problems and meaningful questions, must solve problems according to a scientific method, must be free to develop their own theories and their own conceptualizations, and must be encouraged to test their conclusions in real situations. The progressivist movement focused on several basic principles\*:

1. Students should be free to develop naturally.
2. Student interest should guide the teaching.
3. The teacher should be a guide, not a taskmaster.
4. Student development should involve the whole student, and should include physical, mental, moral, and social growth.
5. Schools should attend to the physical development of students.
6. There should be school-home cooperation to meet the needs of students realistically.

Progressivists focus the curriculum on the needs of students. These needs include academic, social, and physical needs and are fueled by the interests of the students. Therefore, the material to be studied is determined jointly among the school, the teacher, and the students. Learning is considered a natural response to curiosity and the need to solve problems. In the progressivist school, teachers expose students to many new developments in science, technology, literature, and the arts to show that knowledge is constantly changing. Progressivists believe there are great ideas and thoughts of the past that students should study, but they also believe knowledge is changing and the job of students is to learn how to learn so that they can cope successfully with new challenges in life and discover what truths are relevant to the present.

Of prime importance is the idea that knowledge that is true in the present may not be true in the future. Costa and Liebman (1995) estimate that by the year 2020, the amount of knowledge in the world will double every 73 days. Not only is knowledge expected to grow exponentially, but new knowledge will replace old knowledge and old knowledge will become obsolete.

The progressivist teacher engages students in inquiries that the students themselves develop. Students learn from one another, so the progressivist classroom fosters social learning by having students working in cooperative groups. The progressivist teacher is a facilitator, a resource person, and a co-inquirer. The primary role of students is to develop new and deeper understandings continuously through their own investigation. Thus, in an elementary education progressivist mathematics class dealing with place value, we see children in small groups using various kinds of manipulatives to develop their own understandings of place value and helping each other clarify their ideas. The teacher facilitates these activities but does not lecture.

(existentialism and social reconstructionism will be covered next meeting)

***MORE ABOUT PROGRESSIVISM….***

Progressive education is a pedagogical movement that began in the late nineteenth century and has persisted in various forms to the present. More recently, it has been viewed as an alternative to the test-oriented instruction legislated by the [No Child Left Behind](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No_Child_Left_Behind) educational funding act.

The term "progressive" was engaged to distinguish this education from the traditional [curriculum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curriculum) of the 19th century, which was rooted in classical preparation for the [university](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University) and strongly differentiated by socioeconomic level. By contrast, progressive education finds its roots in present [experience](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Experience). Most progressive education programs have these qualities in common:

* Emphasis on learning by doing – hands-on projects, [expeditionary learning](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Expeditionary_learning&action=edit&redlink=1), [experiential learning](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Experiential_learning)
* Integrated curriculum focused on thematic units
* Strong emphasis on [problem solving](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Problem_solving) and [critical thinking](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_thinking)
* Group work and development of social skills
* Understanding and action as the goals of learning as opposed to rote knowledge
* Collaborative and [cooperative learning](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cooperative_learning) projects
* Education for social responsibility and democracy
* Integration of community service and service learning projects into the daily curriculum
* Selection of subject content by looking forward to ask what skills will be needed in future society
* De-emphasis on textbooks in favor of varied learning resources
* Emphasis on life-long learning and social skills
* Assessment by evaluation of child’s projects and productions

**Educational Theory**

**Forerunners**

* Progressive education can be traced as far back as to the works of Locke and Rousseau, with both being respectively known as paternal forerunners to the ideas that would be demonstrated by the likes of Dewey. Locke first speculated, “truth and knowledge… are out of observation and experience rather than manipulation of accepted or given ideas “. He further discussed the need for children to have concrete experiences in order to learn.
* Rousseau furthered this assumption in *Emile* where he made a standpoint against students being subordinate to teachers and that memorization of facts would not lead to an education.
* Another forerunner to progressive education was Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746- 1827). Although he did not consider himself an educator, his research and theories closely resemble those outlined by Rousseau in *Emile*. He is further considered by many to be the “father of modern educational science” (Hayes, 2007, p.2). His psychological theories pertain to education as they focus on the development of object teaching, that is, he felt that individuals best learned through experiences and through a direct manipulation and experience of objects. He further speculated that children learn through their own internal motivation rather than through compulsion. (Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic motivation). A teachers task will be to help guide their students as individuals through their learning and allow it unfold naturally. (Butts and Cremin, 1953)

## John Dewey

Beginning in 1897 Dewey published a summary of his theory on progressive education in School Journal. His theoretical standpoints are divided into 5 sections outlined below:

1. **What Education Is**

Education according to Dewey is the “participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the race” (Dewey, 1897, para. 1). As such, education should take into account that the student is a social being. The process begins at birth with the child unconsciously gaining knowledge with the child eventually and gradually developing their knowledge to share and partake in society.

The educational process has two sides, the psychological and the sociological, with the psychological forming the basis. A child’s own instincts will help develop the material that is presented to them. These instincts also form the basis of their knowledge with everything building upon it. This forms the basis of Dewey’s assumption that one cannot learn without motivation.

Knowledge is a social condition and it is important to help students construct their own learning, as stated:

*“Hence it is impossible to prepare the child for any precise set of conditions. To prepare him for the future life means to give him command of himself; it means so to train him that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities; that his eye and ear and hand may be tools ready to command, that his judgment may be capable of grasping the conditions under which it has to work, and the executive forces be trained to act economically and efficiently” (Dewey, 1897, Para. 7)*

Instruction must focus on the child as a whole for you can never be sure as to where society may end or where that student will be needed or will take them.

1. **What the School Is**

“Education fails because it neglects this fundamental principle of the school as a form of community life. It conceives the school as a place where certain information is to be given, where certain lessons are to be learned, or where certain habits are to be formed” (Dewey, 1897, para. 17) Dewey felt that as education is a social construct then the school is a part of society, it is therefore a part of society and should reflect our community.

Education is the process of living and is not meant to be the preparation of future living (Dewey, 1897) so school must represent the present life. As such, parts of the student’s home life (such as moral and ethical education) should take part in the schooling process. The teacher is a part of this not as an authoritative figure but as a member of the community who is there to assist the student.

1. **The Subject- Matter of Education**

According to Dewey, the curriculum in the schools should reflect that of society. The center of the school curriculum should reflect the development of humans in society. The study of the core subjects (language, science, history) should be coupled with the study of cooking, sewing and manual training. Furthermore, he feels that “progress is not in the succession of studies but in the development of new attitudes towards, and new interests in, experience” (Dewey, 1897, para. 38)

1. **The Nature of Method**

Method is focused on the child’s powers and interests. If the child is thrown into a passive role as a student, absorbing information, the result is a waste of the child’s education. (Dewey, 1897). Information presented to the student will be transformed into new forms, images and symbols by the student so that they fit with their development and interests. The development of this is natural and to repress this process and attempting to “substitute the adult for the child” (Dewey, 1897, para. 52) would weaken the intellectual curiosity of the child.

1. **The School and Social Progress**

Education is the most fundamental method of social reconstruction for progress and reform. Dewey believes that “education is a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness; and that the adjustment of individual activity on the basis of this social consciousness is the only sure method of social reconstruction” (Dewey, 1897, para. 60). As such, Dewey gives way to Social Reconstruction and schools as means to reconstruct society. Finally, as schools become a means for social reconstruction, our educations must be given the proper equipment to help perform this task and guide their students.

*Reference: (Dewey, John. (1897). My pedagogical creed. School Journal. 54. pp. 77-80. Retrieved on November 4th 2011 from* [*http://dewey.pragmatism.org/creed.htm*](http://dewey.pragmatism.org/creed.htm)*)*

## William Head Kilpatrick

Kilpatrick (1871-1965) was a pupil of Dewey and one of the most effective practitioner of the concept as well as the more adept at proliferating the progressive education movement and spreading word of the works of Dewey. He is especially well known for his “project method of teaching” (Hayes, 2007, p. 24). This developed the progressive education notion that students were to be engaged and taught so that their knowledge may be directed to society for a socially useful need. Like Dewey he also felt that students should be actively engaged in their learning rather than actively disengaged with the simple reading and regurgitation of material.

**EXISTENTIALISM**

Existentialism focuses on the *existence* of the individual. Existentialists emphasize that people are responsible for defining themselves. To exist is to choose, and the choices people make define who they are. According to the existentialist point of view, people have two choices: they can either define themselves, or they can choose to be defined by others. The existentialist believes the only “truth” is the “truth” determined by the individual. Individuals determine for themselves what is meant by such terms as *right, wrong, beautiful, ugly, true, false,* and the like. The existentialist truly believes “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” The existentialist believes that, whereas the great thinkers of the past had their own ways of thinking about life and the natural world, their thoughts were uniquely theirs, and today’s students need to find their own ways of thinking and develop their own conclusions.

In the existentialist classroom, students determine what they need to study, guided of course, by the teacher. The idea is for students to come to their own understandings. Because every student is different, no single set of learning outcomes is appropriate for all students. Teachers and the school lay out the topics that are considered appropriate for the students at each grade level to study, and the students make their own meaningful choices.

The teacher is a facilitator, working with each student to help him or her find appropriate materials and the best methods of study. The teacher is a resource—one of many resources that also include other students, books, great works, contemporary works, the made of the night sky in chart form. The teacher moves from group to group, working to facilitate the investigations, probing for understandings, and challenging students’ conclusions.

The role of the student is to pursue his or her investigations of the chosen topic until the desired learning and understandings have taken place. Internet and other technological resources, television programs, newspapers and magazines, and other people.

In the existentialist classroom, students do many different things and study many different topics at the same time. For example, in a science class, a group of three or four students might be dissecting a frog, using models, manuals, and drawings to guide their work; another group might be watching a video on the human circulatory system (using headphones); and yet another group might be recording the observations they had previously

**SOCIAL RECONSTRUCTIONISM**

Social reconstructionism is particularly germane in today’s shrinking world. As its name suggests, the social reconstructionist philosophy of education asserts that society needs to be changed (reconstructed) and that schools are the ideal instrument to foster such changes.

Social reconstructionists believe that world crises require the use of education to facilitate the development of a new social order, one that is truly democratic in nature. Schools are seen as agents of the reformation of society rather than as transmitters of knowledge.

To this end, teachers help their students understand the validity and urgency of social problems. The determination of which of the many important and controversial social problems should be studied is made through democratic consensus of the students under the leadership of the teacher. There is an abundance of social problems at the local, national, and global levels that can be the focus of the curriculum. Examples include violence, hunger, poverty, terrorism, inflation, inequality, racism, sexism, homophobia, acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), pollution, homelessness, substance abuse, and many others. In social reconstructionism, the students select the social priorities to be studied and decide on the educational objectives to be attained from the study. The curriculum integrates all the traditional subjects into single thematic interdisciplinary units. The students and teacher work together to uncover, solve, and propose solutions to the selected problems. The teacher helps students explore the problems, suggests alternative perspectives, and facilitates student analysis and conclusion formation. Throughout the study, the teacher models the democratic process. Teaching methodologies include simulation, role-playing, group work, internships, work-study programs, and other forms of cooperation with the community and its resources.

Similar to their role in the existentialist classroom, students in a social reconstructionist class engage in many different activities to study the agreed-on topic, such as researching through the Internet, reading case histories, analyzing multiple aspects of the topic, formulating predictions, proposing and justifying workable revisions and solutions, and taking action to implement these solutions.

An example of social reconstructionists have fostered the development of nationwide literacy programs, especially for students in urban schools, “helping poor, urban students to become resilient, to change their communities, and thus improve their lives”

A social reconstructionist curriculum can help students become successful in school by encouraging them to develop a sense of self-worth (Reed & Davis, 1999). This can occur by engaging students in activities that instill purpose to their lives, providing them with a sense of accomplishment, and providing them with a support system. Among these

activities are service learning and experiential learning activities that simultaneously foster students’ academic achievement and respond to community needs. As you can infer, social reconstructionist principles are important in helping guide schools, teachers, and students toward a multicultural emphasis.

Social reconstructionism is a very influential and powerful philosophy, especially when its goals of social reform are combined with other philosophies such as progressivism and existentialism. Critics of social reconstructionism are concerned with its singularity of purpose (the formation of a utopian democratic world society) and the indoctrination of students into this purpose. However, the new world order of the 21st century may well need the type of impact that can be given by students whose education is provided in a social reconstructionist environment.