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Authenticity and Transformation: Existential Philosophy's Contributions to Lifelong Learning

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Abstract: Existential philosophy contributes richly to the study of lifelong learning. To expose the depths of this conviction, I will explore how the concepts of authenticity and transformation help clarify and actually bolster the role of existential philosophy in lifelong learning.

Introduction

"Existentialism" is either a word too far removed from every person's vocabulary, or it's a term everyone uses and assumes they understand. I am convinced of the latter. Existentialism is an important concept, discussed by educators in myriad ways. One way that existentialism gets discussed is through related sub-topics. Authenticity and transformation are such sub-topics that have some relationship to lifelong learning. Both concepts, as discussed in existentialist adult education literature, point to the dynamic nature of existence. Furthermore, both have a link with hermeneutics wherein dialogue plays a central role in the increase of self-understanding and critical reflection.

My argument is that when lifelong learning is firmly grounded in conceptual work, the concept becomes more compelling. As it is, lifelong learning faces detractors from multiple sides. However, the concepts I am exploring here, embedded within existential philosophy, promise an intellectually satisfying and creative alternative to scholarly work. Not only this, but existential philosophy presents a set of practical, thought-provoking, and relevant ideas to lifelong learning that are already familiar to many, just from within the literature in adult education.

From Adult Education to Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning grows out of adult education, the latter of which itself signals institutions, whereas the former refers to an ongoing set of processes that occur throughout one's lifetime (Jarvis, 2010). Education refers to institutionalized, planned events towards advancing participants' learning and understanding (Jarvis, 2010). To this list, I would add the transmission of skills and the increase of knowledge. Learning refers to sets of processes, whereby attitudinal, cognitive, bodily, or emotive shifts that have occurred as a result from experience, shapes the whole person (Jarvis, 2010). Especially since adults have so much life experience to offer each other, learning becomes a shared enterprise.

Challenges to Lifelong Learning

Although acknowledging that several competing definitions of lifelong learning exist, Fazal Rizvi argues that neo-liberalism has overtaken the concept of lifelong learning (Rizvi, 2007). Rizvi maintains that although lifelong learning is a sensible idea, specifically its Jeffersonian roots as "lifelong self-education," today the concept is associated with international organizations that promote economic growth and development on a global scale, rather than the individual learner, with interests and goals (Rizvi, 2007, p. 120). Furthermore, as the World Bank notes, the global knowledge economy is

placing new demands on citizens, who need more skills and knowledge to function in their day-to-day lives than can be acquired in formal education systems alone…lifelong learning - from early childhood to retirement – is education for the knowledge economy, and it is as crucial in transition and developing economies as it is in the developed world (Rizvi, 2007, p. 120).

It is understandably irksome that the notion of lifelong learning as preparation to learn for the sake of the knowledge economy rather than for the sake of improving one's own life has overtaken other notions of lifelong learning.

Even more disturbing is the claim Rizvi puts forth, essentially stating that policy makers in the 1960s and 70s "borrowed" progressive educational concepts that were later used to under serve the at-risk populations of developing countries and poorer areas. Because of the emphasis on human capital, and the cheapening of community education to spare expenses, lifelong learning appears to be used for purposes not originally intended. As such, lifelong learning is identified specifically with skill sets, training, and preparation to enter the global market.

Gert Biesta also objects to the lifelong learning model in education. He posits that the notion of lifelong learning has shifted from a broadly Western humanist conception, one that embraces democratic principles, to one that embraces principles of human capital—that is, the rise of the learning economy, which has overtaken the traditional democratic purposes of lifelong learning (Biesta 2006, p. 169). Whereas in the past the individual and community have set the agenda, today the state, universities, workplaces, and governing bodies of professional organizations make lifelong learning essentially unfree, and have effectively transformed learning into a duty whereas it was once was a right. (Biesta 2006, p. 175) Clearly concerned that workforce and career education curricula have now begun to satisfy "lifelong learning" certification requirements, Biesta too adds to the difficulties with limitations to the freedom one pursues in learning endeavors.

Existentialism and Lifelong Learning

But other definitions of lifelong learning exist. Both Rizvi and Biesta point to lifelong learning as an historical idea of self-education across the lifespan and as a liberal, democratic educational ideal, respectively. Unearthing the historical notion of lifelong learning allows us to recover the existential notion of lifelong learning and furthermore allows us to relate it to contemporary conversations within the field of adult education.

As lifelong learning has affiliated with it positive notions, it might seem counterintuitive to then attach a seemingly less than positive idea: existentialism. Existentialism, broadly defined in a humanist sense, is a movement that has roots in philosophy but departs from it (Schacht, 1974, p. 294-295). Existentialism tends to be identified mainly with ideas associated with existential crises or despair. As such, existentialism is all-too easily mischaracterized as the school of thought that examines only certain features, that is negative features, of life that human beings experience and share, such as pain, suffering, and absurdity. Existentialism, as Jean-Paul Sartre pointed out, doesn't dwell only on the difficulties and the struggle of life experience, but also explores the nature and conditions of possibility (Sartre, 2007).

Philosophical existentialism refers to *Existenz-philosophy*, which analyzes the nature of existence. As Walter Kaufmann observed, the existentialist philosophers refused to belong to any school of thought within philosophy and in fact shared mutual distain for the then-current trends within academic philosophy as being too far removed from life, subjectivity, and human concerns. (Kaufmann, 1975, p.

12) A recurring theme among existentialists is authenticity and the resulting transformation of the learner who becomes authentic. I am proposing a humanistic-existentialist approach to authenticity in lifelong learning that foregrounds the following: the development of an attitude of responsibility and the fostering of a capacity, and eventually an ability, to continually renew one's sense of self across the lifespan. This way of being authentic is, in itself, paramount to achieving transformation.

Authenticity

But authenticity is not achieved without struggle. Martin Heidegger posited that the vast majority of human beings carry out their everyday living in inauthentic ways. (Heidegger, 1962) The ordinary, every mode of human existence is linked with others and other things, rather than focused on the self and refining it. That is, human beings have the tendency to fall into activities and go along with projects rather than actively take part in and choose to participate in activities. The result of this mentality is that less attention is paid to our growth and development as individuals, singularly focuses on our goals, our progress, and our cares. The difference is great between a person who has a proactive versus a reactive attitude toward existence, whereas the former plans, prepares, and takes ownership of one's existence, the latter prepares for the eventuality of what will happen and copes with the fall out. The vast majority of human beings conform to this reactive type, shunning self-authorship and what Heidegger calls ownness, both of which are essential to achieve authenticity.

Sartre made a similar observation about the human tendency to act inauthentically. Although Sartre's dictum, "existence precedes essence," (Sartre, 2007) places emphasis on individual responses to the human condition against which humans countless times must define themselves and creatively respond to, Sartre reminds us that human beings ordinarily fall into bad faith. People engaged in daily living, attending to cares and projects of various kinds, tend to live in ignorance or self-deception about the miserable conditions of this world. Socialization can unintentionally impede coming into a true sense of one's self and the use of one's freedom to express one's individuality through questioning existence. People only overcome this fallen state and achieve authenticity when they overcome the crisis of alienation and become self-determined questioners of existence.

Heidegger notes that attention is turned to back on the self when humans are threatened, face death, or come to a realization of their finitude. This is what Heidegger refers to as being-towards-death. (Sartre, 2007) The classic example, the Prophet Job for instance, is the person who on the outside had everything to live for, but fell ill or had a terrible accident that resulted in the loss of material goods, and the swift exit of his family and friends during his darkest hour. The result is the person's loss of secure footing in the world, but firm decision to focus instead on cultivating a rich, inner sense of self, as this was the last "good" the person possessed and paradoxically was the most neglected and underdeveloped aspect of his life. Humans get pulled back from distractions and our absorption into everydayness and instead experience the kind of lucidity that allows us to self-focus. The individual is then able to reorient his efforts in order to carry out future projects with clarity and integrity.

Unfortunately, Heidegger's paradigm for authenticity falls under the themes of existentialism from which Sartre and myself would want to move beyond. These themes are certainly worthwhile and worthy of exploration, but the narrative embedded within authenticity of despair, loss, and recovery of the sense of self reflects the larger problematic themes within existentialism that deal overwhelmingly with death, suffering, and pain.

According to Charles Taylor, authenticity does not refer solely to the degree to which one creates a sense of self, though this is part of it (Taylor, 1991). Rather, authenticity refers to the dynamic interplay between the self and others through dialogue that helps to shape one's identity and actually results in the refining of one's very selfhood (Taylor, 1991). This happens as an individual, through socialization, engages with others formulates a distinctive sense of self. This process is easier said than done, as culture can present as a difficult obstacle to overcome. The individual has found that "there is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else's. But this gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for me" (Taylor, 1991). The possibility Taylor conceives of is the flourishing of the individual. Kreber calls authenticity an ability "to search for an understanding of the ultimate meaning of one's life in one's own way" (Kreber, 2010). This makes sense if one considers education in the broadest sense as existential project of becoming and as coming into selfhood across a human being's lifespan. On this view, selfhood is not a given, or a one-time, or early developmental achievement, but rather is a self-directed, ongoing lifelong, ethical project.

Authenticity's Transformation and Lifelong Learning

Authenticity is transformative. Coming into authenticity implies that a change on a grand scale has taken place. Inauthenticity can surface as Sartrean bad faith, or merely as participating in the everyday goings on without being fully engaged in one's own projects and purposes, according to Heiddegger. Inauthenticity in learning takes the form of mimicry, as Philip Jackson would term it (Jackson, 1986). Skills and knowledge are passed down from teacher to learner to absorb rather than for the learner to help generate from the ground up. Transformative learning is inseparable from life and results in a qualitative change within the learner. Patricia Cranton and Merv Roy write of habits of mind are altered when learners are exposed to alternative new ways of knowing and thinking (Cranton and Roy, 2003). This alteration occurs as a result of critical reflection that takes place during dialogue, when one's values, assumptions, and beliefs have been tested, challenged, or questioned.

Fleshing out further the concept of learning, Jack Mezirow adds that the concept should emphasize biographical, historical, and cultural context in which humans are embedded, becoming critically aware of tacit assumptions one holds, and validating meaning by assessing the reasons for our understandings and beliefs (Mezirow, 2000). This normative call for adult learning describes an existential, in broadly humanistic terms, and experiential phenomenon that points to the shared features of human experience, such as identity development across the lifespan (Jarvis, 2010). Philosophical existentialism highlights the essential features of human existence in the world.

Conclusion: Moving into Existentialist Lifelong Learning

I have attempted to demonstrate that philosophical existentialism goes beyond the gloom and doom conception of the overly used term. It is quite overused, and the representation is an inaccurate expression of the entirety of the existential attitude. For existentialism in lifelong learning to be conceived of as a project separate from crisis or suffering, that is as a project that grows out of a consequence or as a reaction to negative circumstances, I have pulled it apart from those contexts and examined the ways in which authenticity and transformation could be fostered from a more positive standpoint. Perhaps as work continues to be done in this way, existential philosophy and similar movement in lifelong learning will find great use and an intellectual home.

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