

IF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION BECAME CRITICAL WORK EDUCATION

Richard D. Lakes

Georgia State University, Atlanta

Radical reproduction theorists in the recent past have pointed out that vocational education is firmly lodged within the social efficiency tradition that validates class stratification and perpetuates occupational inequality.¹ Their arguments go something like this: School-based curricular tracking acts as a social-sorting mechanism for the labor market. Schools place youths in various tracks depending upon the social class origins of their parents. Working-class youths situated in lower-track curriculums are provided with vocational-technical training, and prepared for dead-end, waged-labor jobs. Thus, the next generation of working classes are readied for lifetimes of employment in blue- and pink-collar service or industrial sectors. Readers familiar with this particular version of reproduction theory know all too well its limitations in explaining the emancipatory potential of democratic schooling.²

One might logically suspect that reproduction theorists would dismiss vocational study on the grounds that it is undemocratic, dominated by business interests ready to reshape unwilling adolescent drones into productive human capital. And in its present form, perhaps, the critics are correct. Yet to suggest removal of occupational studies entirely from the public schools is unwarranted. Where is the evidence that curricular bowdlerizing ever has prioritized a left liberal democratic agenda for public schooling? In fact, just the opposite may be happening: right-wing policymakers in the past have used curricular streamlining as a vehicle for the restoration of social conservatism — an attempt at ideological revanchism.³

Public schools must not deprive working-class students of the potential for liberatory experiences and self-empowerment (by examining and acting upon sociocultural problems associated with work and labor). And, as I will argue in this paper, critical work education can transform vocational studies by preparing students for participatory politics in the workplace.⁴

CRITICAL WORK EDUCATION

Critical work education means sociocultural studies — not skill-based instruction — offering vocationally-bound students the analytical tools with which to understand and act upon the political, social, economic, and historical conditions that create workplace inequities and employer injustices. In other words, critical work education helps students recognize oppressions in their own (and their parents') working-class lives. Empowered students use the theoretical insights of critical pedagogy to challenge the conventional wisdom of dominant society; as critical adult citizens they embrace working-class activism, advancing front-line (shop-floor) struggles in their own employment settings. Critical work education enables students to rethink the assumptions upon which schooling and social structure interact to reproduce a laboring class of individuals who lack social vision, personal agency, and civic responsibility.

Critical pedagogues believe that students can find their own authentic voice through emancipatory work education. Emancipatory learning, Ira Shor writes, awakens students to the social purposes of education. Freed from an imposing school-based curriculum that sanitizes cultural problems, the liberatory classroom “is a break from routines which offers a study of routines so that the familiar shape of life is appreciated with criticism rather than acceptance.”⁵ Critical pedagogy can demystify

work, Linda Valli adds; “since employers often deliberately withhold certain types of information, the school must give students access to organizations, sources, and modes of thinking that empower them to gain control of their work lives.”⁶

It is important to note that critical educators resist technocratic assumptions placing public educators at the service of industrial elites (influencing programmatic and curricular decisions solely based upon the realities of the marketplace). They would argue instead that readying students for workforce employment is only one narrow aspect of human development. What is lacking at present, as Roger Simon and his associates suggest, is public schooling that prepares youths for critical understandings of democratic, participatory, and communal life.⁷ The critical classroom is a place where students can draw conclusions about their social and personal identities through dialogue and discourse, and challenge the assertions of others in order to shape their own convictions.

PARTICIPATORY POLITICS AT WORK

The shaping of critical perspectives in work education requires pupil self-reflexivity about class affiliation, loyalty, and association. Engaging in critical discourses in vocational classrooms and focusing upon the affiliative and collectivist experiences of workers at the front lines (on the shop floor) creates the conditions for working-class activism. Working-class struggle — from the bottom up — is the one important way to recapture the essence of democratic practice in employment settings.⁸

In their book *Power and Empowerment: A Radical Theory of Participatory Democracy*, authors Peter Bachrach and Aryeh Botwinick argue that economic and industrial democracy can be furthered by vigorous workers’ struggles for participatory employment rights.⁹ They charge:

Participatory democratic theory points out that people from the lower classes do not have the opportunity to acquire a political education in privatized socioeconomic and political institutions. To become conscious of their interests, they must actually become involved in the political process. If the process encourages democratic participation, it will be essentially educative. Through learning to communicate and reflect and engage in dialogue, and to act in concert with others, participants acquire the capacity to become reliably and realistically aware of what their political interests are.¹⁰

Bachrach and Botwinick offer two principled reasons for the legitimacy of class struggle in creating a democratic politics of work. First, they argue that the only effective means of transforming industry is to dismantle corporate oligarchy. This requires removal of the layers of governmental regulations and legislation that protect private enterprise from the will and interests of the public. Second, they charge that the subsequent political struggle over participatory rights in the workplace will spill over into the national arena, stimulating the growth of class-oriented alliances and coalitions. Class struggle, simply put, is not the hostile dismantling of the liberal state as foretold by Marx, but the expansion of democracy based upon “the redistribution of power in favor of subordinated classes.” “Each step toward this goal,” they write, “is both an end in itself and a basis for further democratic advance. In the course of this struggle the aim is not to destroy the bourgeois state, but to transform it by mass political pressure from a hostile to a supportive force for greater democratization of society.”¹¹

Ordinary citizens are increasingly disempowered from representative political systems and have been unable to translate their desires and needs to corporate elites. By their inclusion in participatory political process, however, public civil interests will not constitute an external threat to the sanctity of the private firm. “With the democratization of the corporate sector,” Bachrach and Botwinick offer, “the decision-making arena within each firm would be considered public rather than private space. Within this public and democratic space, all major public interests would have a voice in decision making, including consumers and local and regional communities.”¹² (The authors claim that public policymakers would have to incorporate into law statutes and regulations that protect

workers' civic activism from managerial retaliation.) Thus, participatory democratic practices create the potential for greater public interest in the affairs of private enterprise. Although civic activism has always been considered an external catalyst for change (that is, reform of our social institutions), participatory politics has the potential for radical social transformation of private enterprise, resulting in the formation of coalitions, alliances, and networks from within and among the community of workers "to develop sufficient social consciousness and political skills to effectively articulate and defend their interests."¹³

A DEWEYAN VIEW

In the early decades of this century, John Dewey envisioned participatory democracy in the workplace through critical pedagogy when he wrote: "There is already an opportunity for an education which, keeping in mind the larger features of work, will reconcile liberal nurture with training for social serviceableness, with ability to share efficiently and happily in occupations which are productive. And such an education will of itself tend to do away with the evils of the existing economic situation."¹⁴ Dewey believed that a critical work education was the best way to guarantee all citizens the right to full participation in industrial policy and decision making. Yet he also knew that modern schooling did not afford children the educational opportunity for democratic participation in the economic and social life of industry.

In the decades to follow, a vast array of progressive educational practitioners attempted to embody the Deweyan ideal of work education. But they failed, never fully capturing the social origins of Dewey's ambitious experimental philosophy. According to historian Robert Westbrook, few followers of Dewey ever paid significant attention to "the radical commitment to industrial democracy that peeked out between the lines of *The School and Society* and found everyday expression in the life of the Dewey School."¹⁵

In *The Public and Its Problems*, written in 1927, Dewey articulated a most important version for participatory democratic politics through what he termed "a search for the conditions under which the Great Society may become the Great Community."¹⁶ In order for genuine democracy to occur, he charged, inchoate publics must seek arrangements that facilitate the creation of organic communities — individuals organized through associations that act harmoniously among groups. Dewey presented a twofold argument here: First, he held that individuals have shared alliances, interests, and values that place them in the unique position of "forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs."¹⁷ Second, individual objects of loyalty are subsumed by the greater demands which group alliances require. That is, as Dewey wrote, "From the standpoint of the groups, it demands liberation of the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with the interests and goods which are common."¹⁸

Dewey's appreciation of the possibilities for democratic alliances legitimately extends the meaning of "Great Community" into workplace organization. I believe Dewey would claim that participatory democracy through labor alliances, unfettered from external imposition, enables workers to collectively achieve democratic ends — civil liberties which shape the conditions of social and cultural life. "The clear consciousness of a communal life, in all its implications," he wrote, "constitutes the idea of democracy."¹⁹ Cooperative workplaces, for Dewey, become moral organizations because workers are full partners in the creation of virtuous enterprises — as equal participants in the democratic politics of their labor.

CONCLUSION

I have argued for a cultural politics of work that extends the meaning of participatory democracy to the working classes, offering them full civic entitlement in the affairs of private industry. But the workplaces I envision must advance democracy through class-based enterprise control: worker-owned businesses and industries where labor fully participates in the decision-making aspects (i.e.,

management) of the firm. My view, known as market socialism, promotes labor solidarity within a capitalist market economy (maintaining economic efficiency); each enterprise is owned by a community of working individuals vested with control rights.²⁰

One variation of market socialism — employee buyouts of proposed plant closings — has received heightened visibility in the recent recessionary decade of the 1980s. Other workers' investment schemes are looming on the horizon. For instance, with the downsizing of military production, employee-led conversion plans may succeed in retrofitting industries for socially responsible production. There are numerous examples of worker-owned businesses, of course, in which communities of employees have either revitalized failed enterprises or created democratic workplaces anew.²¹

Will future workers value economic and industrial democracy? Perhaps, if students receive political knowledge about socialistic methods of enterprise control in their classrooms. Yet public schools in America do not promote the social ownership of industry. I have never seen a vocational education curriculum guide in which the study of entrepreneurship, for instance, included topics on workers' co-ops and other alternative employee-owned enterprises. Still, I am hopeful that the present liberalizing of vocational education — instructing working-class youths to take their places as critical learners in so-called high performance workplaces — may be a catalyst for the democratic transformation of industry.

The social organization of front-line workers in autonomous work teams holds emancipatory potential for new learning communities on the shop floor. The redesign of work, for example, signals a managerial commitment to human resources, an efficiency movement to humanize the shop floor. Yet the participatory aspects of teamwork (and shared labor alliances) signal the arrival of a democratic ethos within postindustrialism.²²

I return to my initial claim that educational critics not casually dismiss the emancipatory potential of vocational education. Working-class youths presently are prepared to take their places as employees in social organizations where capital controls labor. But in democratically managed firms, labor controls capital, and future workers need political knowledge of cooperative and participatory enterprise governance.²³ When adversary industrial relations in capitalist firms are transformed by elements of market socialism, enterprise information is shared by labor and management alike.

In the postindustrial struggle over control rights vocationally-trained youths who receive political education — *critical work education* — may legitimately challenge the power of a managerial class. That challenge will occur from the bottom-up among workers who, as critical pedagogues, promote socialistic values and participatory practices with their peers in order to advance economic and industrial democracy.

¹ See, for example, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

² See Stanley Aronowitz & Henry Giroux, *Education Under Siege: The Conservative, Liberal, and Radical Debate Over Schooling* (S. Hadley, Mass: Bergin and Garvey, 1985).

³ This argument is advanced by Ira Shor in *Culture Wars: School and Society in the Conservative Restoration, 1969-1984* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986).

⁴ You may consider this view unreasonable since our social institutions reproduce inequality (for example, by creating separate vocational, general, and academic curricular tracks); but public schools also operate within the liberal capitalist state, and embody the contradictions therein. See Martin Carnoy and Henry M. Levin, *Schooling and Work in the Democratic State* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

- ⁵ Ira Shor, *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 99.
- ⁶ Linda Valli, *Becoming Clerical Workers* (Boston: Routledge, 1986), 209.
- ⁷ Roger Simon, Don Diplo, and Arleen Schenke, *Learning Work: A Critical Pedagogy of Work Education* (New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1991).
- ⁸ On the other hand, participatory teamwork and quality of worklife programs are top-down approaches to shop-floor humanization — ones that represent managerial interests in economic efficiency and social conservation of production. See, for example, Ralph Russell, *Sharing Ownership in the Workplace* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985); and *Worker Participation and the Politics of Reform*, ed. Carmen Sirianni (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).
- ⁹ Peter Bachrach and Aryeh Botwinick, *Power and Empowerment: A Radical Theory of Participatory Democracy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).
- ¹⁰ Bachrach and Botwinick, 11.
- ¹¹ Bachrach and Botwinick, 153.
- ¹² Bachrach and Botwinick, 37.
- ¹³ Bachrach and Botwinick, 13.
- ¹⁴ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916/1966), 260.
- ¹⁵ Robert B. Westbrook, “Schools for Industrial Democrats: The Social Origins of John Dewey’s Philosophy of Education,” *American Journal of Education* 100 (August, 1992): 403.
- ¹⁶ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: Henry Holt, 1927), 147.
- ¹⁷ John Dewey, *Public and Problems*, 147.
- ¹⁸ John Dewey, *Public and Problems*, 147.
- ¹⁹ John Dewey, *Public and Problems*, 149.
- ²⁰ John Roemer, “Market Socialism: A Blueprint,” *Dissent* 38 (Fall 1991): 562-69.
- ²¹ *When Workers Decide: Workplace Democracy Takes Root in North America*, ed. Len Krimerman and Frank Lindenfeld (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1992).
- ²² Arthur G. Wirth, *Education and Work for the Year 2000: Choices We Face* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1992).
- ²³ Frank T. Adams and Gary B. Hansen, “Education for Ownership and Participation,” in *When Workers Decide: Workplace Democracy Takes Root in North America*, ed. Len Krimerman and Frank Lindenfeld (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1992).