



# THINKING THROUGH A PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION



## **The key to quality course and curriculum design**

This brief introduction to educational philosophy aims to highlight the importance of such a philosophy in the design of any course, curriculum or program. It is not an exhaustive treatment, but helps illustrate the critical nature of such an underlying philosophy.

## ① The Beginning of Every Course & Curriculum

Every course, curriculum and program starts with a *great idea*. Often, this idea is borne out of a practical necessity, such as a staff training program or a course to address an emerging technology

Schools, colleges and universities will often introduce new programs to keep pace with changing trends in the marketplace or to remain competitive among institutions of learning on the global stage.

Regardless of the program or course however, every curriculum and program is underpinned by a **philosophy of education**.

Often, we take this philosophy for granted. But whether or not we are conscious of it, this philosophy will determine the approach we take to our subject. And it will determine how the course will look. It will determine the role of the teacher, and the outcomes for the student. In short, it will determine the success or failure of the program.

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**The Educational philosophy is the most important step in curriculum and course design.**

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Identifying and determining the philosophy of education underpinning our courses and curricula is the very first stage of program design. Before we do anything else, we need to understand what it is we want to achieve, why we want to achieve it, and how we will go about achieving this goal.

**Any course or program which does not establish this key criteria at the outset will falter at every subsequent stage of program implementation.**

## ② Old & New Models of Education

The face and pace of education is changing rapidly in today's world. Old paradigms of education are being replaced by innovative approaches to both pedagogy and content.

Often, pedagogy - or the way in which education is delivered - is confused with education philosophy. Certainly, a pedagogical approach is informed by our educational philosophy; but there is an important distinction to be made, and several teaching styles can be applied to a single education philosophy.

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### **The educational philosophy provides an answer to the key question: what is the purpose and value of education?**

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Over the last few decades at least, different educational philosophies have prevailed in most schools: **perennialism, essentialism, progressivism, non-cognitivism** and so on. There are elements in each which are commendable, and elements in each which are problematic.

At the core, each of these approaches rely on a deeper philosophical assumption: is the purpose of education to prepare students for a job? Or is the purpose of education to inform the student's character?

The latter approach is the fundamental philosophy of a liberal arts education which aims at helping students develop as critical thinking individuals, adaptable to many and varied environments, and not so much a "worker" trained for a specific discipline or skill that may or may not materialize in the future.

## ③ Key Elements of a Liberal Arts Philosophy

There are various models of liberal arts educational models, but - in general - they share the following key elements.

### ● **Critical thinking and Reasoning Skills**

Students focus on ways to think, reason and problem solve more deeply (see our guide on *Critical Thinking*).

### ● **Personalism**

Students learn to engage in the subject matter in a personal way, so as to make it part of experience through self-reflection, role-play, correlation and cross-curricula thinking.

### ● **Transference**

Students are able to apply reasoning skills and knowledge to a broad range of topics and subjects.

### ● **Valuation**

Students are able to judge and value things appropriately, placing a greater emphasis on things that matter (social cohesion, community, family, friendships, etc) and understand lesser goods in relation to this hierarchy.

### ● **Aesthetic Value**

Students are able to appreciate the contribution of art, music and theatre to culture and the progress of peoples in general.

### ● **Reciprocity**

Students understand that learning, like life, is a process of giving and receiving, of exchange or reciprocity. They understand the value of the individual in the context of the good of the community at large.

## **④ Pedagogical Philosophy**

Whatever the subject being delivered - be it history, language, science or mathematics - there will be, at the core, a reason for teaching these. Is it to prepare the student for the workforce? Certainly, this is an aim of education. Is it more important to form a character?

The underlying philosophy of this kind will impact on the pedagogical approach to the subject at hand.

Approaches which emphasize utility (the preparing of the student for a task or career) will tend to take a different approach to the subject matter than an approach which emphasizes character and thinking / reasoning skills.

Consider, for example, the teaching of mathematics. The following table illustrates a difference in approach depending on the philosophy chosen.

|                     | <b>TASK-FOCUS</b>  | <b>CHARACTER-FOCUS</b>  |
|---------------------|--|---|
| <b>Topic</b>        | Multiplication & Division Skills   | Multiplication & Division Skills  |
| <b>Outcome</b>      | Student can apply skills to real-life activities (e.g., banking, shopping, cataloging) | Student can assess and evaluate mathematical claims (e.g., quantitative interpretation) |
| <b>Transference</b> | Student can apply skills to other, similar mathematical tasks                          | Student can transfer skills to logic and reasoning, such as forming syllogisms          |

There is a growing number of educational specialists who regard the task-focused approach somewhat myopic. The character-focused, or critical reasoning-focused approach on the other hand can incorporate both the outcome and transference of the task-focused approach with the value-added benefit of providing students with qualities that go well beyond the subject.