

Original Paper

Higher Education Means More than Vocational Training in the 21st Century

Yue Lyu¹

¹ School of Education, University of Glasgow, Scotland, UK

Received: June 16, 2023

Accepted: June 26, 2023

Online Published: August 2, 2023

doi:10.22158/grhe.v6n3p1

URL:<http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/grhe.v6n3p1>

Abstract

Based on theoretical approach of Biesta and Nussbaum, this essay argues that higher education means more than vocational training in the 21st century. The article first contributes to different insights into the area of educational purposes and policy. Then it analyzes the specific issue within this theme-vocationalism in higher education-with the help of the two theoretical tools, arguing that Biesta's approach offers a more appropriate and fuller explanation for the issue. Maintaining the diversity of purposes of higher education can make it better function in the social system and prevent us from getting lost in the way of discovering its true value. Finally, there are two recommendations for thinking about the ultimate value of education regardless of its forms.

Keywords

vocationalism, higher education, educational purposes, Biesta, Nussbaum, theoretical analysis

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, higher education is generally considered as the final stage of formal learning that occurs after the completion of secondary education. It develops with times and plays various but important roles in promoting the advancement of society. Despite that higher education has a variety of purposes, it has divergent focuses in different stages of human history which determine its main function and position in the social setting. Historically, vocational education and higher education were respectively derived from opposing traditions and had relatively monotonic forms. While universities concentrated on transmitting systematic scientific knowledge, vocational schools were aimed at providing a series of training for specific occupations (Maclean, 2010). This relationship has continuously changed with the socioeconomic development in different times. In the past few decades, human society has experienced dramatic changes driven by rapidly evolving science and technologies. We now live in an era in which a global and knowledge-driven economy largely changes the structure

of the labor market and makes new demands to the workforce. It places great emphasis on the needs of high-level talents that are no longer satisfied by primary and secondary education. Thus, deeply influenced by neoliberalism and human capital theory which claim that not only individuals but also society can benefit from direct investment on people, governments in many countries around the world turn to higher education for help. When making educational policies in this field, they regard higher education more as an effective way of investment in order to accumulate corresponding human capital for national economic growth and solve the increasingly prominent employment issues (Hayward, 2004). Against this background, a growing trend of vocationalization starts to appear in this area. The incorporation of vocational education into higher education suggests a possible positive direction towards building a more comprehensive system including a wider range of institutions with diverse functions. However, this trend may also lead to excessive professionalism of higher education, which in essence is a kind of simplification of purposes and values of higher education. Such simplification will impede the sustainable development of an individual and the whole society.

In this context, this essay argues that higher education means more than vocational training in the 21st century from a theoretical perspective. The article first explains why this issue and its relevant theme, educational purposes, are important to not only individuals and society but also education itself. Based on that, Biesta's theory of three functions of educational purposes and Nussbaum's capabilities approach are separately clarified in details to contribute to a deep understanding of this area. Finally, the essay demonstrates which theoretical approach provides a more powerful and insightful explanation to the vocationalism in higher education. Two recommendations for thinking about the ultimate value of education are also given at the end of this essay.

2. Educational Purposes and Policy

Education is the process of facilitating individuals' learning, helping them acquire knowledge, shaping values and beliefs, forming habits and mastering skills (Dewey, 2004). This definition indicates one basic purpose of education that is to bring people to as full a realization as possible of what it is to be a human being. Based on structural functionalism (Macionis & Gerber, 2010), society serves as a complex system whose parts are similar to interconnected cogs and work together to promote solidarity and stability. Education is such a cog in the social system which has its own functions and is closely interrelated with other parts in society. Purposes of education are reasons behind its particular position and functions in the whole system which assist in pointing out directions of the progress. They can never be simple or independent. Educational purposes range from very small targets like spreading disciplinary knowledge or preparing students for a job to general goals such as contributing to national economic productivity or meeting social needs. In addition, situated within the social structure, education more or less serves interests of certain groups.

Since ancient times, debates on purposes of education have never stopped. Today, arguments on vocationalism in higher education in nature are reflections on purposes of education. Criticism of over professionalism in this field lies in the simplification of purposes of education. One of negative effects brought about by this vocationalized trend is that it makes higher education become more and more utilitarian. Currently, a paradigmatic shift has appeared not just in the field of higher education policies, but consequently among college students in regard to their attitudes towards the purpose of higher education. Students' expectations have grown increasingly utilitarian and vocational. They mostly count diplomas as a stepping stone to success in the workplace. In order to keep in line with educational policies and satisfy student's needs, higher education inevitably focuses more on offering them transferable skills. Education has become more as a tool that only aims to supply labor to the market and consequently its functions are limited. At the same time, the true value of education is hidden in this situation, which will hinder its own advancement. Except for this, the simplification of educational purposes can weaken the key role of education in promoting social justice and reducing social inequality, which is a major preoccupation of educational policy makers. On the one hand, according to distributive justice, no matter what their backgrounds are, everyone should have equal distribution of all material and social goods (Jawls, 2005). When discussing about this type of social justice, it is easy to only focus on "equal distribution for everyone" but overlook "all material and social goods". However, the latter one is the fundamental part in course of distribution. Distributive justice cannot be achieved by everyone's equal distribution of limited resources. Vocational training in higher education only gives people access to one kind of benefits from higher education. In a society pursuing fairness and justice, each individual has right to enjoy all benefits of this educational resource. On the other hand, in a sense, vocationalism, a narrow view of educational purposes, restricts individuals' freedom of choice with reference to two aspects. First, it restrains people from freely selecting which benefit of higher education they would like to get. Different people may have diverse educational needs. Second, it imperceptibly prevents individuals from making their own decisions about whether they really need higher education. Excessive emphasis on vocational purposes may mislead the public to regard higher education as an indispensable way of getting better jobs. Thus, they have no choice but try to get into higher education. Moreover, in this case, advocacy of vocationalism represents interests of dominant groups such as governments or privileged class who try to use education to maintain their exclusive advantages. Based on the idea of recognitive justice (Gale & Densmore, 2000), a just society should foster respect of different social groups, attempting to serve their different needs. In addition, interests of dominated groups are supposed to be represented through dialogue and conversations. Therefore, discussions about multiple purposes of higher education should be brought back on the agenda to contribute to achieving social justice.

In such a diversified and democratic society, education regardless of its forms or levels has more responsibilities. Profound considerations upon educational purposes can help us have a deep understanding of education and its true value, finding out what the ultimate goal of our efforts is and to what end we are spending our time and energy in the process of conducting educational activities. Thinking more about educational purposes is the first step to address the issue and make education better function in the society. In next part, Biesta's theory of three functions of educational purposes and Nussbaum's capabilities approach will be introduced in details to provide us with insights into this field. Based on critique of the excessive influence of neoliberalism in the globe from different perspective, both of the theorists justify the significance of educational purposes and build a framework for a deep and broad understanding of this area.

3. Biesta: "Learnification" and Three Functions of Education

According to Biesta (2009), in such an age that is full of measurement and comparisons of learning outcomes, there is a need to rethink what constitute good education, a question which is closely related to the purpose of education. Firstly, he points out one important problem hidden behind the increasingly developing educational measurement culture and its excessive concentration on competition. It is that what we measure are not equal to what are supposed to be valued. Currently, educational policies and activities rely so much on evidence that we have an illusion that the factual information from our measurements is what is desirable for education. However, examined from a philosophical perspective, "what ought to be done can never be logically derived from what is" (Biesta, 2009, p. 35). Most importantly, what we measure now may be what is easily being assessed. In consequence, the value of education lies in what we can do rather than what we should do. Targets and indicators of real quality are mistaken for quality itself. In fact, the current educational culture is in essence a culture of effectiveness, embodying an instrumental value mainly addressing a secure process which can ensure certain outcomes. However, value-based judgements are not determined by that but by ultimate values which consider about the true aims and purposes of education. In this context, Biesta further explains why questions about values and purposes of good education have been fading out of our sight. It consists in both external reasons caused by exterior environments and internal ones arising from education itself. As for the former ones, on the one hand, it is generally considered that educational purposes are too personal and subjective to be rationally discussed. On the other hand, people often mistake a specific view of purposes called as common sense for actual values and aims of education. However, such common sense always serves the interests of particular groups instead of those involving the majority. What is worse is that not only the dominant groups use this to maintain their edge and keep the status quo, but also the dominated ones are brainwashed and tend to support such opinions. Thus, social inequalities are not alleviated but reproduced in a different way. With respect to internal reasons, Biesta proposes a term "learnification" to describe the new language of

learning. It refers to the trend that teaching gradually exits from the center and is regarded as the facilitation of learning. Education places much emphasis on learners' initiative and autonomy and it is mainly responsible for the provision of learning opportunities and resources. This trend leads to two problematic aspects. One is that learning makes people more likely to think of educational purposes from an individualistic perspective as what individuals can do rather than considering about the ultimate goal of education itself. The other is the exaggerated attention to the process which may lead to the ignorance of initial aims. At this point, Biesta applies "learnification" to stress the difference between learning and education, pointing out that the former is an individual process and the latter gives the process content (Nakai, Yonezawa & Biseth, 2016). Based on these reasons, he argues that an ongoing debate about the purposes of education should keep its existence in a democratic society.

In order to put the debate back on the agenda, instead of directly describing what are educational purposes, Biesta outlines a conceptual framework into which a wide range of purposes in this area could fit by suggesting three functions of education. The first is qualification. It is aimed at offering people who participate in education knowledge, skills, understanding, dispositions and forms of judgement that enable them to do something ranging from the very specific like preparing students for a job to more general such as learning about modern culture. This function primarily lays the foundation for people to perform in the society and is undoubtedly one of the basic and major functions of formal education. The second one is socialization which is to do with the purpose of making a person become a member of a society, following particular social, cultural and political orders through education. This function shows that education is never neutral, usually representing interests of certain groups in the society and can be used to transfer particular values and continuous specific traditions. That is why a country always places formal education in the first place. Apart from these two functions, education can also make contributions to a person's subjectification. It is a process of individualization which is generally counted as the opposite function of socialization. Its main goal is to provide individuals with capacities that allow them to act independently and freely make their own choices. Nonetheless, the establishment of this framework is just the first step. Starting from that, it is pivotal to shift discussions about actual educational functions to the exploration of real kinds of functions, namely aims and ends that education should have.

Biesta's theoretical approach gives us insights to the area of educational purposes from two perspectives. First, he indicates the imperatives of rekindling the debate on educational ultimate values by pointing out the problem behind current situations and factors impeding such a debate. Furthermore, this part can give us a hint at identifying educational issues that in nature is linked with this area. Second, he offers us a starting point which gives directions to explore the ends of education by creating a relatively comprehensive and understandable system of educational functions.

4. Nussbaum: Capabilities Approach

Criticizing the simplistic theory of social development and policy that concentrates much more on economic indicators and outcomes rather than people's quality of life, Nussbaum (2011) develops a capabilities approach borrowed from one of Sen's key term to address a set of questions about both quality of life and basic social justice. She uses the plural form of capability to highlight the diversity and distinctions of the most significant elements of individuals' quality of life which cannot be reduced to simple economic metric. The core of the capabilities approach lies in individual freedom and choices. It considers each person as an end, caring about not only their own state, but also opportunities available to each of them. This gives respects to personal free will and uniqueness to a large extent. It is far more different from egalitarianism which tries to get everyone equal distribution of the same thing regardless their diverse needs and historical backgrounds. On the contrary, this approach is designed to ensure people's autonomy so that they can act and choose freely based on their characters. Grounded on the idea incorporated in this approach, when promoting social development, we should think about what kind of a society is supposed to be created so that everyone can enjoy the maximum freedom to make their own choices in it, rather than how we could help people fit into the current social structure. Therefore, the capabilities approach values much on a person's self-recognition.

Some basic concepts are introduced to clarify the approach. First is the notion of capabilities that is the heart of this theory. There are three forms of capabilities: basic, internal and combined. Basic capabilities are innate and lays the foundation for individuals' future development of capabilities. They suggest some kinds of potentials. Internal capabilities are described as states and characteristics of a person including personality, intelligence, emotions, perceptions and so on. Being different from the former ones, they are trained abilities which are influenced by external social environments and then are internalized into one's traits. As for combined capabilities, they are the synthesis of internal capabilities and external conditions that permit free functions of internal ones. In a sense, combined capabilities could be seen as exterior extensions of the internal ones in the surroundings. In spite of their differences, one cannot be truly developed without the other one. Another crucial aspect is about functioning which refers to the realizations of capabilities. The acquisition and strengthening of different forms of capabilities largely depends on their functioning. However, it may be restricted by particular social contexts. Functioning applicable in this approach is different from its traditional view that is more like an expression of utilitarianism. In this case it also focuses on freedom. It means that people can freely decide how to make their capabilities function instead of being forced to function in a certain way (Carlson, Nguyen & Reinardy, 2016). Thus, the development of capabilities that in essence is the exercise of human freedom should be ultimate goals for a fair society. Nonetheless, sometimes compromises are also needed because there is no absolute freedom. In certain circumstances, the right to do things may destroy not only one's own capabilities but also those of others.

Based on these, Nussbaum further proposes ten essential and irreducible capabilities which are held up as the threshold of guaranteeing human dignity and their freedom of a series of choices. They cover from bodily health to mental health, from reason to emotions, from each individual to relationships with others, from study to play, and from human beings to other species and living environments. The basic claim of social justice is to respect human dignity and the quality of life, which requires that every citizen should be placed above the threshold by empowering their freedom to achieve these ten central capabilities. In the process of pursuing such kind of social justice, education plays a key role. It provides individuals with opportunities to develop their capabilities through a variety of educational functioning (Lozano et al., 2012). For example, general education such as literacy, reading and writing aimed at transmitting a broad range of knowledge forms the value system of students and exercises their abilities of imagination and reasoning. Physical education ensures them to be able to keep healthy. Vocational education helps people master professional skills. Environmental education makes individuals aware of the significance of surroundings and learn how to get along well with the nature. In this way, the capabilities approach builds a framework which also gives directions to thinking about educational purposes in different ways around the core issue of developing necessary capabilities. The quality of life is always supposed to be taken into considerations as well. At the same time, Nussbaum's theory offers us a new way to approach educational purposes. Since ancient times, one continuing humanistic purpose of education is to evoke human beings' self-recognition. The objects of education are thus always people themselves. However, as time goes by, education become more and more complicated with the development of the society. It has increasingly closer connections with its situated setting. As stated in Nussbaum's theory, individuals develop capabilities within certain circumstances. It is also necessary to provide enough social setting for the functioning of people's capabilities. Thus, the objects of education in current times are not limited to individuals. They can also be environments. Furthermore, when we think about educational purposes, we can not only consider about the value of educating people, but also the value of educating environments, in other words, how we could create better environments for the free development of people's capabilities through education.

5. Vocationalism in Higher Education

As demonstrated in the previous section, theoretical approaches of Biesta and Nussbaum make great contributions to the area of educational purposes and policy. In terms of the issue, while both of them can be used to have a deep understanding of the vocationalism in higher education, Biesta's theory better fit in with the situation.

To begin with, the trend of professionalism in higher education is largely influenced by neoliberalism coming from the economic field and its focus on human capital, which in essence suggests a simplistic view on purposes of education. Such simplification could be seen as a part of educational measurement culture mentioned by Biesta. It regards graduates' employability as an important learning outcome. The higher the employment rate is, the more effective the higher education can be. Meanwhile, in this case, similarly being criticized by Nussbaum, the quality of higher education is only measured by economic indicators. Whether higher education meets the needs of labor market becomes the standard of measurement. As for negative effects caused by the excessive vocationalization in this field, both theories can provide certain explanations but from divergent aspects. According to Biesta, fitting into labor market is just an instrumental value of higher education. The extravagant emphasis on vocational training may make people have a wrong understanding of the ultimate value of education. Moreover, in fact, such a trend largely represents interests of governments for improving national economic productivity which may fail to address the real needs of different groups in the society. Apart from these, vocationalism also limits individuals' freedom of choices that is placed at the center of capabilities approach. The imposed significance of receiving higher education as the guarantee of a better career prospect prevents people from freely deciding whether they truly need higher education and which kind of benefits they would like to get from it. Besides, it also impedes the exercise of people's central capabilities by narrowing down the function of higher education. Given these situations, it is necessary to carefully rethink about the purposes of higher education so that it can better promote individual development and social justice.

The criticism of the vocationalized trend in higher education does not mean that vocational training is not needed in this field. On the contrary, it is one of the main purposes of higher education in the 21st century. However, in such a diversified and democratic society, higher education is supposed to mean more than just vocational training. Thus, there should be an ongoing debate on its purposes. At this stage, Biesta's theoretical approach has more explanatory power. It directly points out three functions of education. With reference to this issue, vocational training serves as the qualification and socialization functions of higher education. It gives students transferable skills which prepare them for better jobs. Meanwhile, it tries to make them become a qualified member who satisfy the needs of the labor market in the society. However, subjectification also has the same value of the other two which is aimed at providing students with capacities that allow them to act independently and make their own choices. This point is in accordance with the ultimate value of capabilities approach. Although

Nussbaum's theory could provide different insights into this issue, in contrast with Biesta's theoretical concepts, the capabilities approach is a more comprehensive and multidimensional framework for the whole human development based more on a political perspective. In addition, because the central capabilities are supposed to be secured to everyone at least at a threshold level in a decent political order, discussions about purposes around their development are more likely to be related to earlier stages such as primary or secondary education which is compulsory. Moreover, capabilities approach is critiqued for being too individualist and universal which can be applied to a variety of fields but lacks specific measurements (Carlson, Nguyen & Reinardy, 2016).

6. Conclusions

Education plays a key role in history of human development. The purposes of education decide its functions and positions in the society. They should always be taken into careful considerations in order to not only promote the advancement of human beings and the society, but also find out the ultimate value of education itself. Based on theoretical approach of Biesta and Nussbaum, this article first contributes to different insights into the area of educational purposes and policy. Then it analyzes a specific issue within this theme (the vocationalism in higher education) with the help of the two theoretical tools, arguing that Biesta's approach offers a more appropriate and fuller explanation for the issue. As for the issue itself, this essay points out that higher education is supposed to mean more than just vocational training. Maintaining the diversity of purposes of higher education can make it better function in the social system and prevent us from getting lost in the way of discovering its true value. Finally, there are two recommendations for thinking about the ultimate value of education regardless of its forms. First, no matter how many kinds of purposes education may have, what we really pursue is a comparatively pure education which gives everyone infinite possibilities. Second, the existence of education is to make each person and each nation in the world be able to believe the truth.

References

- Biesta, G. (2009). Good education in an age of measurement: On the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 21(1), 33-46. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-008-9064-9>
- Carlson, J., Nguyen, H., & Reinardy, J. (2016). Social Justice and the Capabilities Approach: Seeking a Global Blueprint for the EPAS. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 52(3), 269-282. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2016.1174635>
- Dewey, J. (2004). *Democracy and education*. New York: Macmillan.
- Gale, T., & Densmore, K. (2000). *Just schooling: Explorations in the cultural politics of teaching*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Hayward, G. (2004). Foreword: A century of vocationalism. *Oxford Review of Education*, 30(1), 3-12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305498042000190032>
- Lozano, J. F., Boni, A., Peris, J., & Hueso, A. (2012). Competencies in higher education: A critical analysis from the capabilities approach. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 46(1), 132-147. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9752.2011.00839.x>
- Macionis, J. J., & Gerber, L. M. (2010). *Sociology*. Canada: Pearson Education Canada.
- Maclean, R. (2010). *Vocationalisation of Higher Education: Issues and Challenges*. [pdf] Researchgate. Retrieved April 29, 2018, from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228485992>
- Nakai, Y., Yonezawa, T., & Biseth, H. (2016). Teacher Education as a High-quality Learning Environment. *Bulletin of the Graduate School of Education, Hiroshima University, Learning and curriculum development*, 1(65), 15-24.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2011). *Creating capabilities: The human development approach*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674061200>
- Rawls, J. (2005). *A theory of justice*. London: Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjf9z6v>