

LEARNING: A CONTINUING DESIRE

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Seminar: Ways of Knowing

[Assignment: Write an essay responding to an idea or set of ideas in Alfred North Whitehead's "The Aims of Education." First, make clear Whitehead's ideas, then add your own reflections--examples, disagreements, extensions, qualifications--to the original idea. Be sure to have a clear thesis, what you believe about Whitehead's ideas, then develop these through a combination of methods. Keep your focus on your thesis throughout.]

(1) At the turn of the nineteenth century there was an overwhelming push by psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, and educators to study the learning process and the effectiveness of various teaching methods. For example, some sociologists studied the way that classes interact internally to create an atmosphere more conducive to learning. At the same time, psychologists studied the importance of the teacher/student relationship. During this era of change, Alfred North Whitehead suggested many improvements in the British system of education. One of Whitehead's ideas involved the distinguishing between the various steps of acquiring knowledge: the gathering and using of information, and then the application of this knowledge. Whitehead considered the gathering, using, and applying of knowledge a three step sequence essential to obtaining a valuable education. I agree that such steps are necessary. However, I believe that these are stages working in a continuum rather than a process with a beginning and an end. By comparing Whitehead's theory to the four learning modes as defined by David A. Kolb, we can see these patterns as they work in a continuing form.

(2) Before studying the individual theories, it is important that we understand the difference between a continuum and a process. A continuum consists of a series of stages that remains ongoing. For example, the rotation of the earth is a continuous cycle. On the other hand, a process involves organized steps ending in a result. Activities such as elections are processes rather than continuums, in that they involve steps such as campaigning, voting, and tallying. Determining the winner establishes the end result in this case. These differences define the conflict between Whitehead's and Kolb's theories.

(3) Whitehead's and Kolb's theories are similar in the stages or steps that they cite as necessary experiences in the act of learning. Each man describes the first step as a gathering of information. Specifically, Kolb describes this stage as Reflective Observation. Reflective Observation involves a "tentative, impartial, reflective approach to learning." It calls for a "preference for role of observer rather

than participant." Whitehead would label this as the mental process of acquiring information in order to gain knowledge. Secondly, each man believes that there is a need for an analytical stage in which the individual learns how to use his knowledge. Whitehead explains that this step involves using knowledge for the purpose of learning. Kolb agrees that this step must involve an active participation with knowledge. However, he simply separates it into two steps known as the Abstract Conceptualism stage and the Active Experimentation stage. In both cases though, the stages involve an active approach to learning which includes rational analysis and experimentation through activity. Finally, the third step defines the purpose of the whole system in that it relates the learning to everyday life. Whitehead believes that the application of knowledge to one's life makes the information worthwhile. Kolb, describing this as an "experience-based approach to learning," agrees that application encourages further observation and involvement with the environment.

(4) The third stage of application is the source of the discrepancy in the logic of the two men. Whitehead believes that the third stage of application will result in an end to the process. He regards this to be the goal of the whole system of learning. On the other hand, Kolb sees this stage as another step in a continuing series. He believes that this application will cause a person to, once again, be interested in gathering information and, thus, signal the beginning of another cycle. This contradiction defines the difference in the theories of the two men. In my own personal experiences, I would have to agree with Kolb's argument. Similar to Kolb, I believe that learning will never end. Once the continuum begins, there is an ongoing spark and desire for information needed to further one's knowledge. I feel that Whitehead was short-sighted in his theory of process that ends with a result. A valuable education is one that is constantly being challenged and questioned. This system should never end.

(5) By comparing and contrasting the theories of two great thinkers, we gain a better understanding of this controversial issue. If this constant questioning is to be encouraged, then we must conceive of the learning system as a continuum. Learning may never be fully understood. However, by thinking of it as a continuum and constantly questioning the issue, we may gradually build better understanding of how we learn. Either way, this continuing understanding will help to build greater advances in problem-solving for the future. It will help challenge ideas that have always been accepted and so lead us closer to the best solution.