

What Is Education For?

My Personal Philosophy of Education

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An exploration of education as a relational, democratic and transformative process, drawing on Dewey, Freire, Noddings, Shor and critical perspectives on neoliberal education.

For as long as I can remember, I've believed that education is more than just the transmission of information. It's about shaping who we are, how we relate to others, and how we make meaning in the world. As a learner, I've experienced both the constraints and the freedoms of education. Some classrooms stifled my curiosity, while others inspired me to think critically and care deeply. These experiences have led me to the belief, echoing Dewey (1916), that education is not preparation for life - it is life.

My personal philosophy of education is rooted in curiosity, empathy, equity, freedom, and human connection. I see education as a dynamic, co-constructed, and lifelong journey that connects the individual to society. It empowers students to grow intellectually, emotionally, and socially, enabling them to question assumptions, find their voice, and contribute meaningfully to the world. In this essay, I explore the aims of schooling in mass culture, the characteristics of an educated person, the kind of society educators should help build, and the distinction between educative and mis-educative experiences.

Living in today's media-driven and neoliberal society, I've often seen schooling becoming increasingly focused on performance, rankings, and measurable outcomes, rather than on meaning, personal growth, or reflection. I, too, once measured my worth through exam scores and academic awards. But I've come to realise that this performative model comes at a cost. Students internalise a narrow definition of success, leading to stress and disconnection from joyful and meaningful learning. As Keddie (2016) argues, this culture of performativity often forces children to define their worth in terms of scores and competition, leading to anxiety, perfectionism, and ontological insecurity.

Hursh (2005) explains how neoliberal reforms have reshaped schools into marketplaces defined by accountability, competition, and standardisation. This narrows education to economic productivity. Schools and universities are now treated like businesses, where students are positioned as consumers and learning becomes commodified. The Week 7 lecture described this shift as the rise of "audit culture," where value is placed on data, scores, and compliance (Kabir, 2025b). However, I believe that the true purpose of schooling goes far beyond preparing students for the workforce or ranking them on academic performance. Unlike approaches focused solely on measurable learning outcomes like ATAR and NAPLAN, education should look at wider aims like societal transformation and empowerment (Kabir, 2025a).

Schooling should help young people live meaningful and connected lives by encouraging curiosity, creativity, and a love for learning. It should empower them to work collaboratively, think critically, challenge assumptions, and express their ideas confidently. Noddings (2003)

further emphasises that happiness, care, and emotional well-being should be central aims of education, not secondary outcomes. Freire (1974) warns against traditional models that silence student voices and reinforce passivity. Instead, Shor (1992) advocates for classrooms where dialogue, reflection, and active participation are central to the learning experience. Hyde (2021) extends this by arguing for the inclusion of spiritual and emotional dimensions in learning, making space for silence, imagination, and wonder as valid ways of knowing.

To me, an educated person is someone who has been transformed - not just informed. They are open-minded, self-aware, and ethically grounded. They ask critical questions, reflect deeply, and listen with empathy. Early on, I believed being educated meant being at the top of the class. I won academic awards and focused on memorisation and performance. But over time, I realised that real learning happens when knowledge is meaningful and connected to life. Dewey (1916) reminds us that true growth involves reflection and purposeful action. Growth is also tied to overcoming challenges with intelligence and learning to set and achieve meaningful goals (Dewey 1916).

Giroux (1988) and Shor (1992) helped me rethink literacy as not merely the ability to read and write, but as the capacity to “read the world” and transform it through critical consciousness and engagement. An educated person should have the courage to challenge injustice and the humility to keep learning. This person understands knowledge in context, values diversity, and seeks to contribute to the common good.

As Tait (2013) notes, there is a close link between the philosophy behind a school system and the kind of society it helps shape. I believe we must aim for a society that is ethical, inclusive, and democratic. One that values cooperation over cutthroat competition and compassion over conformity. It is a world where people are encouraged to think critically, communicate respectfully, and work together towards meaningful social goals. Such a society does not reduce human worth to productivity or academic success. It recognises and respects diverse forms of expression, intelligence, and identity. It enables individuals to express themselves in ways that reflect their unique cultures, backgrounds, and strengths, while promoting collective well-being and responsibility. This is a society where no one is left behind because they don’t “fit the mould.”

While I recognise that a degree of competition can be healthy and motivating, I believe education should help students develop an internal compass to balance competition with cooperation, empathy, and integrity. As Noddings (2003) writes, education must foster a climate where care is central and where moral principles guide human interaction. Dewey (1916) similarly argues that schools should model the democratic society we aspire to live in. This kind of society is also one in which individuals feel empowered to speak up, to engage in political and civic life, and to help shape the policies that affect their lives. Shor (1992) reminds us that “education is never neutral”—it either empowers or silences. The society I envision is one where political participation is encouraged, where diverse voices are heard, and where students grow into adults who are agents of transformation.

Looking back, I realise that much of my early schooling was shaped by what Dewey (1916) would describe as mis-educative experiences - learning that failed to promote lasting growth or critical understanding. I excelled in highly individualistic, performance-driven classrooms, consistently topping my class and collecting academic prizes. At the time, I equated success with grades, rankings, and academic validation. Although I achieved high marks, I was simply mastering the system, not engaging meaningfully with knowledge. I studied alone,

memorised content, and kept ideas to myself. But the learning felt mechanical. There was little space for collaboration, curiosity, or joy. Things changed when I started learning from teachers who encouraged discussion and participation. Through dialogic learning, I found connection and purpose. Explaining concepts aloud, linking them to real-life contexts, and hearing different perspectives transformed my learning. I moved from learning to perform, to learning to understand. This shift aligns with Freire's (1972) vision of liberatory education, where knowledge is co-created through dialogue. Shor (1992) describes this as participatory, student-centred learning. At Deakin, my understanding has continued to evolve. In seminars, I learn from my peers as much as from the lecturers. Through reflective tasks, discussion, and peer feedback, I'm continually expanding my knowledge. This has deepened my understanding on Freire (1972)'s notion of *conscientização*, a critical consciousness developed through praxis as essential to learning through reflection and action (Statham, 2025). Giving feedback sharpened my ability to critically engage with educational ideas, while receiving feedback taught me the value of clarity, depth, and real-life examples. These practices have brought a new dimension to learning - making it active, collaborative, and transformative.

These sessions reflect Dewey's (1916) vision of educative experiences - participatory, meaningful, and connected to life. An educative experience, as framed by Kabir (2025b) in lecture 7, is one that equips students with the capacity to make sense of future situations in deeper, more meaningful ways.

Educative learning, as I've come to understand it, is active, relational, and deeply human. It fosters growth through dialogue, empathy, and reflection. In contrast, miseducation reduces learning to passive absorption in a teacher-centred environment, stifling curiosity and limiting meaningful engagement. I recall a vivid example from my school years. In civics class, we were expected to memorise textbook definitions and never question what we were taught. There was no opportunity for dialogue, exploration, or personal connection to the content. In contrast, my business teacher created a dynamic, participatory classroom where we worked collaboratively on real-world projects, such as marketing campaigns. These experiences made learning exciting and relevant. I felt heard, challenged, and motivated to contribute. As highlighted in the Week 8 lecture, education should embed skill development within a sense of curiosity and excitement (Kabir & Statham, 2025a).

When teachers position themselves as co-learners alongside students, learning becomes an active, relational process rather than a passive transfer of information. As Kabir and Statham (2025b) point out, the early stages of any educational or communicative relationship should emphasise trust-building and rapport over the rush to achieve outcomes. This foundation is crucial for fostering a safe and empowering learning space. Noddings (2003) similarly emphasises that happiness and emotional well-being should be central to education - not treated as secondary to academic performance. In my experience, students flourish when they feel seen, supported, and inspired.

My understanding of education has evolved profoundly over time. I now see that education is not solely about delivering content or achieving outcomes - it's about cultivating meaningful relationships, embedding values, and designing systems that support holistic growth. True education nurtures both critical thinking and emotional intelligence. It prepares learners not just for employment, but for ethical, active, and thoughtful participation in society.

This unit has fundamentally deepened my philosophy. Engaging with theorists like Dewey, Freire, Noddings, and Shor, alongside lectures and seminars that challenged my assumptions, opened my eyes to the political and structural dimensions of education. I had always believed there was more to learning than grades - but I hadn't fully considered how systems of power, neoliberal policies, and inequality shape educational experience. Now, I see education as both deeply personal and profoundly political. It should not reinforce conformity and performance but instead advance justice, freedom, and the collective reimagining of a better world.

I aspire to be the kind of educator who helps shape a democratic, inclusive, and ethical society- one where students are not silenced or sorted into rigid categories, but recognised as capable, multifaceted individuals. I envision classrooms where knowledge is co-created, diverse perspectives are embraced, and care is not an afterthought, but a foundation. I want students to feel heard, valued, and genuinely excited to learn. As I move forward, I carry this belief not merely as an idea, but as a lived commitment to how I will teach, learn, and grow alongside others.

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