Notes on the Relevance of Life Course Research to Liberal Arts Curriculum

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*I cannot learn anything that does not interest me. . . . I congratulate myself on this, for I am firmly persuaded that every unnatural activity of the brain is as mischievous as any unnatural activity of the body.*

George Bernard Shaw

Observing that in order to learn something, we must attend to it, and that in order to capture our attention securely, something needs to relate importantly to our system of relevances, leads us to inspect theories of the human life course with great anticipation. Surely the “developmental tasks” of the various “stages” are profoundly relevant to each of us, and if learning outcomes are related to these tasks, then profound education will occur. The temptation is great for liberal educators who are committed to lifelong learning to develop a sequential curriculum which tries to correspond to the sequences of the life cycle. There are at least three problems with this line of thinking, however.

I

At this point, the theory is inadequate to inform such a curriculum, as little consensus exists among theoreticians of the life cycle. Several notable examples easily illustrate this problem. Charlotte Buhler has developed a system of five stages, using various combinations of two biological variables (growth and reproductive ability): 1) a period of progressive growth without reproductive ability, 0 to 15 years of age; 2) a period of progressive growth with the onset of reproductive ability, 15 to 25 years; 3) a period of reproductive ability and stationary growth, 25 to 45 (or 50) years; 4) a period of beginning decline and loss of reproductive ability by the female, 45 (or 50) to 65 (or 70) years; and 5) a period of further decline following loss of reproductive ability in one of both sexes, 65 (or 70) years to death (Buhler, 1935, 1968b). Buhler associates with each phase certain characteristic goal setting patterns (Buhler, 1964, 1968a):
In terms of goal development the first phase, childhood, seemed [in a study of 200 biographies; Buhler, 1933; Frenkel, 1936] to be a time when life goals were hardly ever visualized, and this period, age 0 to 15, was called the phase before self-determination to life goals sets in. The second phase, that of adolescence, roughly between age 15 and 25, was one of tentative, programmatic self-determination. Only in the third phase, that of middle adulthood, between 25 and 45 years of age, was a more specified and definite self-determination the rule. The fourth phase, later adulthood, roughly from 45 to 60 or 65, was defined as a period of self-assessment and a review of past activities, with a reorientation for the future. The fifth phase, representing the older and old age, the years after 65, was conceived of as a period when an individual experiences life fulfillment, resignation or failure (Buhler, 1968a, pp. 42-43).

However, Bernice Neugarten, like Buhler, taking a theoretical stance on the basis of her own and her colleagues' extensive empirical work, argues the opposite position that conscious goal-setting behavior does not correlate with age:

When all the studies in this book [Neugarten et al., 1964] are considered together . . . it appears that they form two groups. Those in which chronological age provided order in the data are those where the focus was on the intrapsychic, the processes of the personality that are not readily available to awareness or to conscious control and which do not have direct expression in overt patterns of social behavior. The second group, those in which individual differences are relatively independent of age, are those where the focus was more on more purposive processes in the personality, processes in which attempted control of the self and of life situations are conspicuous elements (Neugarten, 1964b, p. 192).

Furthermore, other scholars, such as Marjorie Fisk and Orville Brim, Jr., doubt the whole notion of sequential life "stages" (Fisk, 1980; Brim, 1976). After a recent study of existing work, Brim concluded that

. . . there is as yet no evidence either for developmental periods or "stages" in the mid-life period, in which one event must come after another, or one personality change brings another in its wake (Brim, 1976, p. 8).

Daniel Levinson, of course, disagrees. On the basis of his well-known study of a sample of forty men of different occupations, races, and social classes, Levinson posits a regular sequence of adult life stages, each stage being five to seven years in duration, each having its particular developmental tasks, and overall, showing an alternating pattern of transition and stability (Levinson et al., 1978).
Erik Erikson, undoubtedly the most influential theorist in this area, also advances a stage theory of development, although the perspective and detail of what he calls his epigenetic model of psycho-social development differs notably from Levinson's scheme (1959, 1963). Erikson is first and foremost an ego psychologist, while Levinson is primarily a social psychologist. Making a substantial addition to psychoanalytic development theory (staging that the final phase of development is the genital stage initiated in adolescence), Erikson argues that throughout life the individual is challenged by the emergence of eight fundamental ego capacities, all existing in the person from birth but each coming to the fore of his or her experience in a distinct sequence. The pattern is threefold: 1) the ego capacity emerges; 2) inevitable frustrations or negative consequences occur in developing the capacity (e.g., situational blocks and disastrous experiments); and 3) an enduring (but not necessarily permanent) consequence evolves (eventual development of the capacity vs. manifestations of unresolved conflict). This pattern produces eight stages and eight developmental conflicts: 1) infancy, birth to 1 year, basic trust vs. mistrust (Freud’s oral stage); 2) early childhood, 2 to 3 years autonomy vs. shame and doubt (Freud’s anal stage); 3) play age, 4 to 5 years, initiative vs. guilt (Freud’s phallic stage); 4) school age, 6 to 11 years, industry vs. inferiority (Freud’s latency period); 5) adolescence (Erikson is purposefully vague about ages and ceases to assign them after the fourth stage), identity vs. identity diffusion (Freud’s culminating genital stage); 6) young adulthood, intimacy vs. isolation; 7) adulthood, generativity vs. self-absorption; and 8) maturity, integrity vs. disgust and dispair.

The point here is not to review the literature on adult development (a number of good reviews already exist: Brim, 1976; Cain, 1964; Clausen, 1972; Fisk, 1980; Giele, 1980; Knox, 1979; Levinson, 1980; Merriam, 1978, 1979a, 1979b; Neugarten, 1964a, 1973; Rice, 1979). I wish simply to demonstrate that life course theorists disagree about fundamental questions, such as whether development (in the sense of unfolding, building, or growing) is even an appropriate word for the adult portion of the life course.

All is not disagreement, of course: Patterns of biological maturation and aging are recognized by everyone; age-related status passages in the individual’s careers in various social institutions are also agreed to by everyone; and most scholars suspect some kind of systematic changes in the individual’s intrapsychic processes, which for want of a more tangible designation we often refer to as the ego. However, insightful individuals have recognized for at least 2600 years that the life course comprises biological, sociological, and psychological transitions. In the seventh century B.C., Solon wrote of ten bio-socio-psychological stages of seven
years each:

A boy at first is the man; unripe; then casts his teeth;
Milk-teeth befitting the child he sheds in his seventh year.
Then to his seven years God adding another seven,
Signs of approaching manhood show in his bud.
Still, in the third of the seven his limbs are growing; his chin
Touched with a fleecy down, the bloom of the cheek is gone.
Now, in the fourth of the sevens ripen to greatest completeness
The powers of the man, and his worth becomes plain to see.
In the fifth he bethinks him that this is the season for courting,
Bethinks him that sons will preserve and continue his line.
Now in the sixth his mind, even open to virtue,
Broadens and never inspires him to profitless deeds;
Seven times seven, and eight; the tongue and the mind,
For fourteen years together are now at their best.
Still in the ninth is he able, but never so nimble
In speech and in wit as he was in the days of his prime;
Who to the tenth has attained, and has lived to complete it,
Has come to the time to depart on the ebb-tide of Death.

In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare ventured his rendition of the seven (bio-socio-psychological) ages of man in his memorable “all the world’s a stage” speech:

... 
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms.
And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwilling to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress’s eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the bard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon’s mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon line,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper’d pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything (II, vii).

A “strange eventful history” indeed; whatever fundamental agreements currently exist in life course theory do not appear, for all our modern sophistication, particularly new or precise. At the present time, it would most certainly be foolhardy to construct a liberal arts curriculum for adults based on any particular theory.

II

Because of the sudden explosion of popular and academic interest in the life course perspective, the creation and dissemination of information regarding longitudinal patterns is increasing rapidly. The generation of Americans just deceased may well be the last to live out their lives unaware of life course patterns. This new awareness will undoubtedly change many attitudes and behavior, thus making the discerned patterns inaccurate shortly after their discovery and broadcast. For example, it has been noted that in the later stages of life, men become more submissive and more nurturing than they were in the first half of their lives, while women become more dominant and authoritarian (Gutmann, 1968; Jung, 1933; Neugarten and Gutmann, 1968). We can interpret this to indicate that men and women have a similar androgynous capacity, which is repressed early in life by conventional sex roles and which is unleashed in later years when the family is raised, the children socialized, the career set, and strict conformity increasingly inconsequential. With an awareness of this phenomenon, many younger men and women will not wait until the last half of life to develop their full capacity (this, of course, is a statement of contemporary fact, not a prediction). And so the phenomenon disappears. This is to be expected especially among the American people where it is only reasonable that the great geographical and social mobility which has characterized the American past would be joined by a mobility of consciousness as the known territory of the mind expands. Even if a particular life course theory were to gain broad acceptance, it could very shortly become false because of its very truth.

III

The third rather obvious point is that something need not relate direct-
ly to a profound developmental task in order to attract our attention sufficiently for enduring learning to occur. As a matter of fact, for many of us the more closely something relates to a sensitive personal issue (something threatening and usually provoking some rather devilish defenses), the more difficult it is for us to learn it. Too much is at stake (perhaps even fundamental emotional stability) to lay ourselves wide open to the topic. The theory which makes us feel better is always preferred, not necessarily the one which provides the most order to the data. Feeling good clearly has a higher priority than abstract order (although powerful theory may be what makes some of us feel good). Ordering our data in a way acceptable to ourselves is far more important than ordering the data. Educators who are also therapists know the similarity between education and therapy, but they also know the rather profound difference: education aims at growth, therapy at healing. Of course, growth often occurs in the healing process, but still, the basic difference stands. In education, we do not assume an incapacitating wound; in therapy, we do. Developmental issues may become festering sores and make poor topics for educational study. However, our Schutzian system of relevances is complex enough to overcome these possible learning blocks by supplying a large number of relevances and, therefore, interests.

But let me discuss in more detail that which I am refuting, for I find a great deal of promise in combining life course research and the liberal arts curriculum, and I hope that this refutation is only temporary. Of the three problems I have raised, I find the first one (the lack of agreement among life course researchers on fundamental issues) to be the most serious, and I presume that if research continues at its present pace, that consensus will increase substantially in the upcoming decade. (The other two problems I have pointed out can be handled easily enough by maintaining flexibility in curriculum and by developing a keen eye for individuals for whom therapy is more appropriate than education on certain issues.)

A procedure for combining liberal arts curriculum and life course research is straightforward enough and can be reduced to three essential tasks.

1. The initial step is to articulate clearly the philosophy which is to inform the curriculum. As an example, I will use a philosophy which I know rather well, the one which we have developed at Marylhurst Education Center, a liberal arts college which orients its programs primarily to adult learners. We began by establishing that our fundamental concern was the quality of individual experience. We could have chosen other concerns of course (e.g., social justice, world peace, environmental responsibility); however, we found that most concerns of human value can be easily organized as constituent parts of a concern for human ex-
experience (e.g., social justice and world peace promote high quality human experience, as does a healthy environment). We then decided that the most critical issue in human experience was the nature of the individual’s relationship with his or her reality. If the relationship be meaningful, flexible, harmonious (a prettier alternative to “adaptive”), and if the individual has power to evaluate and influence its direction and outcomes, then the quality of the individual’s experience is high by our definition. Reality does not refer only to objects with physical properties but includes all objects of consciousness which the individual perceives to exist whether or not he or she wants them to. This combines elements of subjective reality (such as social roles, institutions, prejudices, and ideologies) with those of objective reality. None of us can escape this relationship with reality without penalty (e.g., schizophrenia). If education is the drawing out of the individual’s potential (which incidentally should not be seen as static from birth but as changing with experience), and if liberal education is, in its most radical (or literal) sense, the development of the individual’s potential to live freely, then helping the person to develop his or her relationship with reality (and, thereby, to develop the quality of his or her experience) is surely the most fundamental goal of liberal education. It is difficult to imagine anything more liberating and constructive for the individual or for the systems of which he or she is a part.

The objects of consciousness which constitute individual reality can be divided into four broad categories, which in turn can be seen as four categories of historically evolving, interconnected relationships in which the individual is willy-nilly involved. These relationships are as follows: 1) with the self (the individual’s own mental, physical, spiritual being); 2) with others (other individuals, small groups, organizations, institutions, societies); 3) with the environment (encompassing all non-human, organic and inorganic, artificial and natural elements and systems of the human habitat); and for many people, 4) with a transcendent or immanence (that which is perceived to greatly exceed humans in power, extent, and longevity, and which inspires the human spirit; for some, this is a synthesis of all the other relationships; for others, it is a discrete entity). It is these four relationships which inform the liberal arts curriculum at Marylhurst, with the intent being to help students to develop to the baccalaureate level the knowledge and skills (analysis, synthesis, communication, and evaluation) necessary to have meaningful and harmonious relationships and to be able to evaluate and influence the direction and outcomes of individual relationships and systems of relationships. Most conventional liberal arts curricula, with their general requirements of “Western Civilization” and so on, can fit quite comfortably in this framework, and if they cannot, I think a naive “Why not?” is in order.
To be valid, the response should issue from a coherent philosophy and not be simply an unanchored rationalization. I expect that not everyone will agree with this philosophy and approach to liberal arts curriculum. But agreement for the purposes of our present discussion is irrelevant since this skeletal exposition of the curriculum philosophy is merely to provide us with a working example.

2. The second task in combining liberal arts curriculum and life course research is to determine the operational categories for dividing students according to their status in the life cycle. This may or may not be keyed by chronological age, by sex, by social class, by occupation, or by ego development. This is precisely what we do not know at the present time but hope to know in the near future. For the sake of illustration, we will use Erikson’s well-known categories (see above). We will assume that the biological, sociological, and psychological similarities of the individuals in these categories will be greater within the groups than between them. In actual practice, this must be well demonstrated, or we have no business using the categories.

We are now ready to combine our curriculum philosophy with our life course theory, thus producing a simple matrix (Figure 1). Liberal education, as a concept, is clearly not limited to higher education, and there is no reason why this matrix could not serve as a general map for lifelong liberal education.

3. The final task is obviously to develop various curriculum units (courses, seminars, tutorials, and practica) for each of the cells in the matrix. If desirable, selected units could span cells in either the horizontal or vertical dimension. The cell entries would be the most flexible components in the model and could be changed readily without weakening the integrity of the curriculum structure. For an example, take any course syllabus and determine which relationship (or relationships) it involves (e.g., general biology would involve the natural environment and the biological aspects of the self); decide which life stage groups would be most interested in which parts of the content (e.g., adolescents and young adults would be more interested in maturation, the older groups would want to concentrate on aging, and most groups would probably be equally interested, or uninterested, in the natural environment); then assign the course (or its parts) to the appropriate cell (or cells).

Confucius, one of liberal education’s more stellar lifelong learners, summarized his life as follows:

At fifteen I set my heart upon learning. At thirty, I planted my feet upon firm ground. At forty, I no longer suffered from perplexities. At fifty, I knew what were the biddings of Heaven. At sixty, I heard them with docile ear. At seventy, I could follow the dictates of my
own heart; for what I desired no longer overstepped the boundaries of right (*Analects*, II, iv).

Few of us grow wise enough to claim this achievement. But perhaps a liberal curriculum which evolves with us throughout our lives will help us toward that end.

### A CURRICULUM MODEL FOR LIFELONG LIBERAL EDUCATION

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*Specific Curriculum Units*
References


_____., "Professional Literature on Middle Age." New Directions for Continuing Education 2 (1979b): 17-21.


