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## Revisiting Franklin Bobbitt's Thoughts on Vocational Education

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### Introduction

In the 1910s and 1920s, John Franklin Bobbitt (1876-1956) made a monumental impact on the emergent curriculum field; in fact, many scholars argue that his 1918 book, *The Curriculum*, marked the starting point of the field itself and call him the founder of curriculum.<sup>125</sup>

Some defining principles embodied in his curriculum theory, like activity analysis, became popular in his time and have been studied by later scholars. Cremin summarized activity analysis as the classification and detailing of “the full range of human experience with a view to building a curriculum that would prepare for it.”<sup>126</sup> “Training for Occupational Efficiency,” the second of five parts of his book, occupies 62 pages and is absolutely vital to an understanding of his work.

Any topic has to struggle for a position in the curriculum. Vocational education is not an exception. In this paper, I want to come back to the starting point to see what kind of posi-

tion and duty Bobbitt gave to vocational education. For, sometimes, to revisit a starting point can help us to understand where we came from and adjust the direction we are going to.

### Division of Labor Called for Vocational Education

In Bobbitt's view, “the vocations are the specializations that make up the Great Cooperative Enterprise. In total, they provide those services and commodities needed by the population which individuals and families do not provide for themselves by their unspecialized labors.”<sup>127</sup>

This kind of idea came with the development of industry and the division of labor. Living in the same time of Bobbitt, John Dewey also noticed that:

Back of the factory system lies the household and neighborhood system. Those of us who are here today need go back only one, two, or at most three generations, to find a time when the household was practically the center in which were carried on, or about which were clustered, all the typical forms of industrial occupation.<sup>128</sup>

But things changed. In order to raise the efficiency of production, division of labor became more and more specialized. When specialization went beyond what a general upbringing could offer, the foundational needs of vocational education emerged.

Everyone is impacted by such a change. Given that a self-sufficient economy and aristocratic society have gone, “with only occasional exceptions, each of the twenty million

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<sup>125</sup> William F. Pinar et al., *Understanding Curriculum* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2004), 70. Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum: 1893-1958* (New York: Taylor & Francis Books, Inc., 2004), 83. Bobbitt's 1924 book, *How to Make a Curriculum*, is always considered as a companion volume to the 1918 one.

<sup>126</sup> Lawrence Cremin, *The Transformation of School* (New York: Vintage, 1964), 199.

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<sup>127</sup> Franklin Bobbitt, *The Curriculum of Modern Education* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1941), 381.

<sup>128</sup> John Dewey, *The School and Society* and *The Child and The Curriculum* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 9-10.

children now in the public schools of America will in time be obliged to earn his living . . . Each is to be a producer to the extent that he consumes.”<sup>129</sup> In this sense, it can be said that education at any level is some kind of vocational education. Even to get a Ph. D can be seen as a preparation for an academic career. It is also one part of economic specialization.

Putting aside such an understanding, though, even vocational education in the narrower sense, as we tend to use it, should play an important part in curriculum. Here Bobbitt gave an anthropological explanation, stating that:

Nature is very parsimonious with her supplies of food, clothing, fuel, shelter; more illiberal still in supplying books, pianos, theaters, railroad and steamship tickets, church pews, and college courses . . . Nature supplies only the crudest raw materials. The rest must be created by human labor.<sup>130</sup>

Humanity has taken raw nature in hand and through heavy labor controlled it and shaped it to its purposes. Through productive toil—thought Bobbitt—humanity has won its leisure, its surplus energies, and the means for its art, literature, science and religion. “In civilized conditions,” labor also plays an irreplaceable role. “The most obvious thing is that men and women must work; that to their callings they must devote a major portion of their time and energy.”<sup>131</sup>

Since Bobbitt put curriculum as a series of experience which children must have in order to become what adults should be, it is easy to see why he put so much focus on vocational education in his structure of curriculum. In Bobbitt’s time, more than ninety per cent of students would be compelled to “enter the

ranks of tradesmen, merchants, miners, farmers, factory operatives [and] nearly all would be turned back into the so-called ‘lower’ vocations”.<sup>132</sup> There is no reason—argued Bobbitt—why the education of the majority of students should be sacrificed for those few who would finally go to universities. It is unfair and undermines the foundation of society.

## Vocational Education as a Power for Change

Bobbitt’s idea of vocational education went far beyond the teaching of some useful technologies which could be used in adult life.

**... vocational education should be a power for change.**

First of all, vocational education should be a power for change. “In the imperfections of the occupational world, one finds the call for directed vocational training”.<sup>133</sup> If all occupational affairs were efficiently and harmoniously conducted by the present adult generation, then education would have but a simple task: to hand over to the rising generation the fully developed heritage of the present generation. But the present world of occupation cannot be of the type described:

Education under the circumstances has, therefore, a double task to perform: 1) to act as a primary agency of social progress, lifting the occupational world to a higher and more desirable level; 2) to do this by educating the rising generation so that they will perform their occupational functions in a manner greatly superior to that of their fathers. The task is to develop in the rising generation, not merely

<sup>129</sup> Franklin Bobbitt, *The Curriculum* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1918), 55.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> Franklin Bobbitt, *The Curriculum* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1918), 62-63.

<sup>133</sup> Franklin Bobbitt, *The Curriculum* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1918), 63.

the degree of proficiency found in the world about them, but to carry them much beyond; to look, not merely to the actual practices, but rather to those that ought to be.<sup>134</sup>

In this sense, students of vocational education should develop a competence to judge the existing situation and try to improve it with a view of science.

Bobbitt used the work of the farmer as an illustration. In his time, the efficient farmer, in terms of proven standards, could raise, not one hundred bushels of potatoes to the acre, which was about the average, but rather two hundred to five hundred bushels. Farming, for example, “presents the problem of controlling a large number of independently variable factors: soil ingredients, lime, nitrates, phosphates, sand, clay, moisture, soil oxygen, weeds, quality of seeds, temperature, light, plant parasites, and a number of others.”<sup>135</sup> In order to improve production, a farmer must see each factor in its separate working in order to control it. Most of them are invisible or indistinguishable to the eye of sense; they are to be seen only by the inner eye of technical agricultural science. Only the trained farmer has this inner light and this inner vision. Here, then, is what vocational education really matters.

Secondly, Bobbitt argued that vocational education is born to be public. Given the division of labor, no person is an island. Everybody, to a certain extent, needs others to supply the things needed for living. Meanwhile, each person should contribute to society in some other respects. Each is to be a producer to the extent that he or she consumes. This situation connects everyone into a whole and unites them in an organic way. So it is to

those who receive the service, not those who perform it, to judge whether it is good or not.

This makes vocational education essentially public. For it has to be open to intelligent criticism from consumers in the pursuit of social improvement. When an occupation improves itself, the whole society should also benefit from it. In such a society, everyone relies on others and should respect others for this very reason.

Based upon this, Bobbitt gave vocational education a foundation in social ethics. “Occupational labors clearly represent the basic service to humanity, the most fundamental social service.”<sup>136</sup> The physician, for example, supported by a given community, is expected to serve that community to the best of his or her ability. The physician should respond to calls for service at any hour, and under all conditions. Not the physician’s convenience, but the patients’, is to be served. The physician must keep inviolate all information professionally confided to his or her care. “In these matters the ethics of the medical vocation is clearly social. The work is recognized as social service. The physician’s measure of honor is the greater because it is so” and—Bobbitt claimed—“most professional service is of analogous type.”<sup>137</sup>

While, “these professional labors are not the only ones about which public opinion is weaving systems of social ethics.” He continues to argue that, previously, “corporations were expected to serve the stockholders and directors. Now we have faced them the other way. They are to serve the public.”<sup>138</sup> Bobbitt took rail road company as an example. Those companies could no longer fix the qualities, rates, or conditions of service in ways dictated

<sup>134</sup> Franklin Bobbitt, *The Curriculum* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1918), 64.

<sup>135</sup> Franklin Bobbitt, *The Curriculum* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1918), 72.

<sup>136</sup> Franklin Bobbitt, *The Curriculum* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1918), 55.

<sup>137</sup> Franklin Bobbitt, *The Curriculum* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1918), 57.

<sup>138</sup> Franklin Bobbitt, *The Curriculum* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1918), 57-58.

solely by self-interest. These were fixed in the interests of efficient public service. To serve others and to make a maximum of social service for a minimum of social expenditure has become, Bobbitt claimed, the aim of an occupation.

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In Bobbitt's view, "this weaving of a social ethics about vocational groups proceeded with almost disconcerting rapidity."<sup>139</sup> He treated this movement as the irresistible movement of civilization:

The growing zeal for the vocational education of all classes, shown by clear-sighted men and women whose primary interest is general human welfare, is closely related to this changed and still rapidly changing attitude toward all useful vocations. They see that every useful calling is not only in itself social service, but that it is coming to be so recognized; and that it is being more and more given its proper measure of social reward and honor.<sup>140</sup>

Vocational education, in this sense, does not only mean teaching a particular craft which is useful and would ensure a youngster gainful employment. On the one hand, labor, as the foundation of civilization, can give the laborer a sense of existence, honor and value. On the other hand, as vocational education goes forward, society should benefit from it and create an atmosphere where everyone respects and recognizes each other.

## Enlightenment as the Spirit of Vocational Education

Opinions devaluating vocational education already existed in Bobbitt's time. He said: "those who object to vocational education in public schools because manual labor is sordid and unclean, should note that its frequent unloveliness is due, not to the fact that men work, but to the conditions of their labor."<sup>141</sup>

Instead of showing any superficial pity to those poor men, Bobbitt pointed out the reasons behind the disrespect working people are often shown (and, by extension, industrially-focused vocational education):

Insanitary shops, factories, and mines sap the physical vitality of the workers. Their inertia, ignorance, and inefficiency result in too long a work-day and a too-extended deadly mechanical monotony. They live usually within a narrow mental and social horizon. There is a great dearth of humanizing influences, companionships, and associations; and owing to this absence of uplifting influences and opportunities, they all too often tend to vicious and destructive animal pleasures. Too often they are compelled to live in crowded, unwholesome houses; are too often ill-fed, ill-clad, and uncleanly of habit; and have wages that permit little better even if they should desire and attempt a higher standard of living.<sup>142</sup>

It is very easy to see how destructive the labor conditions once were and how dissatisfied Bobbitt was with that.

For Bobbitt, much more than any technology-focused teaching, "the purpose of occupational education is the removal through general enlightenment of the injurious or de-

<sup>139</sup> Franklin Bobbitt, *The Curriculum* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1918), 58.

<sup>140</sup> Franklin Bobbitt, *The Curriculum* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1918), 61-62.

<sup>141</sup> Franklin Bobbitt, *The Curriculum* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1918), 56.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

structive labor conditions.”<sup>143</sup> To admit that too much labor is debased and debasing was not an excuse, Bobbitt thought, for ignoring vocational education. It is, instead, the very reason for undertaking it. It is the presence of imperfections in the labor field that justify the ameliorative labors of education.

**... “the purpose of occupational education is the removal through general enlightenment of the injurious or destructive labor conditions”**

Here lies a problem of recognition. As much work, like that of a physician or a banker, has been recognized as valuable, some other ones, like that of the farmer, the small merchant, the housekeeper, the artisan, and the factory-worker, still lack this kind of recognition.

It is easy to see that these classes serve the general welfare as fully and as fundamentally as the other classes mentioned above; but their labors are not yet so fully recognized as community service . . . The difference in the social-service situation is not a difference of reality, but only one of social understanding and recognition.<sup>144</sup>

Clearly, Bobbitt recognized the inherent value of all forms of labor (rightly understood).

Bobbitt used the farmer as an example. The farmer performs an indispensable community service in supplying the original elements of food and clothing. His service is not less high than that of the physician simply because he ministers to the bodily side of the human. The physician also ministers to the bodily welfare (and perhaps in a less funda-

mental way). We can do without the labors of the physician most of the time, but how can we imagine one day’s life without the products of the farmer? Vocational education is needed, therefore, right here. Science can be applied to scrutinize the service of the farmer and to point out ways in which the farmer may better serve the general welfare. Bobbitt used the term *enlightenment* here. And I agree.

It is true that vocational education has a role to play in the service of enlightenment: to sweep out customary social beliefs existing with the help of reason. Vocational education should fight for fairness, for those who makes contribution, but rarely get recognized.

## Conclusion

The problems that Bobbitt faced 100 years ago still trouble us.

**Vocational education should fight for fairness, for those who makes contribution, but rarely get recognized.**

In some countries, vocational education is looked at as the last choice for those students who have failed in academic competition. For some students, to accept vocational education is a way to get a job and stay alive. For some governments, it may be a tactic to lower the juvenile crime rate and increase profit margins. Nothing more is expected. Losing its commitment to innovation and public spirit, vocational education risks being reduced to a production line—one which produces generations of docile youngsters into fixed social positions. Students caught inside would lose the opportunity for self-realization. In addition to all of the technologies which might be taught, what vocational education needs imminently, right now, is just such a spirit of enlightenment.

<sup>143</sup> Franklin Bobbitt, *The Curriculum* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1918), 56-57.

<sup>144</sup> Franklin Bobbitt, *The Curriculum* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1918), 59.

On the other hand, society should also change its attitude. As a form of education, vocational education concerns all students, given that they are all called to contribute directly to their society. There is no reason to depreciate it. What true vocational education calls for is equality, rather than any kind of mercy:

So long as equally useful vocations have been so unequally honored and rewarded, and so long as labor conditions have offered such unequal opportunities for self-realization, this educational problem has been insoluble. The solution is coming, not through the impossible plan of lifting all people into the professions, but through lifting all vocations to the social level of the professions. The process is making the door to any useful vocation a door of opportunity.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Franklin Bobbitt, *The Curriculum* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1918), 63.