

Entrepreneurial Education and Economic Progress

Rebecca M. Taylor

Emory University

In “The Unexpected Alignment of Progressive Ideals and the Commercialization of Education in Entrepreneurial Learning,” Johan Dahlbeck and Peter Lilja consider the relationship between progressive education and the marketization of education. They argue that although the principles of progressive education and the marketization of education appear to conflict, these two educational trends share a number of commonalities and, ultimately, are united in opposition to traditional education. Dahlbeck and Lilja argue that entrepreneurial education in Sweden exemplifies these commonalities and serves to highlight the problems that arise in the convergence of progressive and economic approaches to education. Here, I will consider their argument and question whether it is possible for entrepreneurial education to take a form that is truly progressive and so to avoid these criticisms.

First, let’s review the core components of the authors’ argument. In reviewing the basic elements of progressive education and the marketization of education, Dahlbeck and Lilja argue that these forms of education share several common features:

- a student-centered approach that emphasizes the learner over the teacher and learning over teaching;
- an emphasis on individual (student) preference satisfaction;
- and, a resulting deprofessionalization of the role of teacher.

These commonalities arguably stem from the pursuit of two distinct forms of progress: social progress in the case of progressive education, and economic progress in the case of the marketization of education.

As described by the authors, in the former, social progress for all is pursued by schools by embodying principles of democracy and equality that call for a student-centered approach; whereas in the latter, economic progress

is sought by preparing each individual to maximize their potential for success in the marketplace. This focus on preparing each individual student for economic success leads to the aforementioned shared features with progressive education.

The authors then argue that the convergence of these shared features is exemplified in the case of entrepreneurial education in Sweden and, further, that this convergence leads to several problems, evidenced in the entrepreneurial education example. First, we end up with an impoverished notion of the role of education in promoting well-being; and second, the teacher-student relationship is weakened, diminishing the teacher's role of exposing students to new, and at times challenging, traditions of thought.

The Swedish example presents a compelling case of the manifestation of both progressive and market-based approaches to education in entrepreneurial education. However, we may consider whether this convergence in the Swedish example is characteristic of entrepreneurial education more broadly. Is entrepreneurial education locked into this troublesome relationship, or can it take other forms? In the remainder of this response, I will consider these questions and the implications for the possibilities of entrepreneurial education beyond the Swedish example.

First, let's consider further the concept of economic progress. Dahlbeck and Lilja frame the pursuit of economic progress through education as focused on promoting the economic well-being of the individual student, in contrast to the social progress that is at the core of progressive education. This conception of economic progress is certainly dominant in discussions of educational marketization. It is also closely tied to, though distinct from, the promotion of the economic well-being of the student's parents (in the case of children), who are typically in the position of making decisions about their child's education, with both the child's and their own well-being in mind. Despite the prevalence of these two related conceptions, other understandings of economic progress are available and relevant to this discussion. If we conceptualize economic progress at the societal, rather than individual, level, its relationship to societal well-being and social progress can come to the forefront.

In this case, education that pursues economic progress would seek to advance economic justice and equality. It would prepare students not only to be aware of economic injustices, but also to succeed in spite of them and to combat them actively for their own good and the good of society as a whole. If we take this form of economic progress as central to education alongside social progress, do the same challenges still arise?

Education that pursues this form of economic progress would still be concerned to some extent with individual economic success, but not at the expense of social progress and justice. The role of the teacher would be to guide students in combatting injustices that they may experience in the marketplace in order to succeed and to expand their understanding of economic injustice and their role in it. Fostering this kind of understanding would create new demands of the teacher while also revaluing the teacher as bringing a depth of understanding needed to facilitate critical awareness among students and as supporting students' individual growth as their critical awareness develops. This kind of economic justice model for education may embrace some of the same principles of student-centeredness but it need not align with educational marketization, avoiding the troublesome convergence identified by the authors.

Given this more idealized conception, we can consider whether there is any evidence that entrepreneurial education could take this form. I will offer two examples for consideration that emerge in the higher education and adult education contexts in the United States: social entrepreneurship education and re-entry education. Although I will not argue that either of these forms meets the ideal of truly progressive entrepreneurial education, they embody distinct approaches to advancing economic and social progress that may provide insights into how to better advance this ideal.

The former—social entrepreneurship education—takes place in formal and informal settings and bridges the traditional divide between the for-profit and nonprofit sectors. These programs endeavor to teach their students how to create social change and advance social progress through entrepreneurship. Social entrepreneurship has been incorporated into formal higher education contexts, with courses first appearing at elite institutions in the US in the 1990s

and subsequently growing to include majors and minors.¹ Social entrepreneurship education has grown rapidly, yet it continues to be concentrated in elite institutions, consequently limiting its reach to students with access to those institutions.

Re-entry education programs are another example of incorporating entrepreneurial education in response to inequalities of opportunity for economic success. Criminal justice-involved people face serious barriers to employment upon reentering their communities after periods of incarceration.² Entrepreneurial education is one approach to promoting the economic stability and success of justice-involved people, which has emerged in response to the reality of these barriers. In some cases, the same elite institutions that offer social entrepreneurship education to their full-time students also support re-entry programs of this kind (e.g., Project ReMADE at Stanford Law School³). Project ReMADE aims to help its students develop “basic business skills” and “the social capital necessary to launch and sustain their businesses.”⁴ These programs use entrepreneurial education as a response to the reality of barriers to economic opportunity experienced by justice-involved people. By supporting their students in circumventing the formal barriers and informal biases that individuals with conviction records experience on the employment market, entrepreneurial reentry education presents a pragmatic approach to advancing economic progress for this group.

These two forms of entrepreneurial education share a few common features. They are both grounded in barriers to social progress that exist currently. As described by Jerr Boschee, social entrepreneurship (and the resulting social entrepreneurship education) grew as a result of several historical forces, including, for example, decreased support for social efforts from the public sector, reduced charitable giving by corporations and individuals, and an increased number of people experiencing poverty.⁵ Re-entry entrepreneurship education is a response to decades of “tough-on-crime” legislation and policy-making that have led to a wide array of formal barriers to employment for individuals with prior criminal justice involvement, in addition to the strong social bias against those with records that exists on the individual level among hiring managers. The pursuit of social progress calls for solving these underlying social problems

and inequities, but given the slow rate of progress in changing legislation and the policies that contribute to them, individuals must find practical ways to work toward better outcomes within the current system.

Social entrepreneurship education and re-entry entrepreneurship education represent forms of entrepreneurial education that arguably advance a conception of economic progress that incorporates social progress alongside individual economic success. At first glance, at least, they appear to avoid some of the critiques of forms of entrepreneurship education that focus solely on the economic advancement of the individual. Further consideration of the nature and extent of their relationship to social and economic progress may provide a productive way forward in exploring the potential role of entrepreneurial components in progressive education.

1 Gregory J. Dees and Beth Battle Anderson, "Framing a Theory of Social Entrepreneurship: Building on Two Schools of Practice and Thought," in *Research on Social Entrepreneurship: Understanding and Contributing to an Emerging Field*, ed. Rachel Mosher-Williams (ARNOVA Occasional Paper Series 1, no. 3, 2006): 39-66; Debbi D. Brock and Susan Steiner, "Social Entrepreneurship Education: Is It Achieving the Desired Aims?," (February 16, 2009), available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1344419>.

2 Debbie Mukamal, Rebecca Silbert, and Rebecca M. Taylor, *Degrees of Freedom: Expanding College Opportunities for Currently and Formerly Incarcerated Californians* (Stanford Criminal Justice Center and Chief Justice Earl Warren Institute on Law and Social Policy, 2015), https://www.law.berkeley.edu/files/DegreesofFreedom2015_FullReport.pdf.

3 Project ReMADE, Accessed March 15, 2017, <https://law.stanford.edu/project-remade/>.

4 Project ReMADE.

5 Jerr Boschee, "Social Entrepreneurship: The Promise and the Perils," in *Social Entrepreneurship: New Models of Sustainable Social Change*, ed. Alex Nicholls (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).