This is the published version (version of record) of:


Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30033910

Reproduced with kind permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright : 2004, PESA
The Educative value of values

R Scott Webster
Monash University
scott.webster@education.monash.edu.au

There appears to be increasing interest among certain educational institutions to include values as a prominent feature of their practice (Buckley & Erricker, 2004). One recent example is the Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority (VCAA) who released a discussion paper earlier this year, which indicates that values are to play a much greater role in government schools. However, endeavouring to promote values as common standards can be criticised to be problematic in our pluralist society, because not all values are necessarily valuable.

This paper reviews the VCAA paper and attempts to respond to Nietzsche’s (1998) challenge to question the value of our values, by offering guidance as to how the educative value of values might be determined. Such an examination is expected to identify a potential tension between a particular civic education and that of a more philosophic and universally educative perspective. In order to do this, a differentiation between a value (noun) as ‘objective fact’ and value (verb) as a ‘subjective relation’ is made. This paper will adopt an existential perspective by drawing upon consequentialism, intentionality and the works of Kierkegaard and Dewey, to argue that emphasis should be placed on the subjective aspects of educative valuing without fostering an objective/subjective divide.

VCAA Discussion Paper
At the end of March 2004, the VCAA discussion paper titled A Framework of ‘Essential Learning’ was published, with the initial consultation period to be concluded by the end of June. This document signalled that the Labour government intends to replace the Curriculum Standards Framework (CSF) which had been established in 1995 by the previous Liberal government. From initial consultation the authors of the new VCAA document suggest that there is a need to build the framework upon a clear set of values. They propose that three ‘pillars’ are to form such a basis, and these are:

1. human understanding is organised through disciplines of knowledge represented by key concepts;
2. students require generic or cross-curriculum skills; and
3. the core business of education is personal and social development.

This third ‘pillar’ of personal and social development involves knowledge, skills, values and personal attributes. While no mention of where this notion of the ‘pillars’ originated, it does appear that there may be indirect reference to the four pillars in UNESCO’s document Learning: The Treasure Within (Delors, 1998). UNESCO’s pillars include:

1. learning to know;
2. learning to do;
3. learning to live together, learning to live with others; and
4. learning to be.
However, the pillars in this UNESCO document are fundamentally different to those of the VCAA.

In Victorian education, the trend through the 1970s was of social justice, but during the early 1980s this changed to economic rationalism. The CSF document in 1995 was immersed quite fully into this economic perspective, and made values less explicit emphasising instead skills, knowledge and competencies (Ling et al., 1998, p. 48). With reference to the Australian State and Territory Ministers for Education (MCEETYA) agreement in 2002 that there should be a values education study, the VCAA document proposes a set of ten values which is argued to have emerged from studying various Australian school communities and which are adopted to underpin the framework. These values consist of;

1. Tolerance and understanding
2. Respect
3. Responsibility
4. Social Justice
5. Excellence
6. Care
7. Inclusion and trust
8. Honesty
9. Freedom, and

The implied justification for this particular set of values appears embedded within the described purposes of education. The document states that there are two main purposes of education which clearly appeal to ends beyond itself for its justification. These purposes of education are describes as:

1) To equip students with knowledge, skills and attributes to:
   • Contribute socially, economically and culturally to society
   • Be responsible individuals capable of relating to family, friends and colleagues
   • Be informed citizens who understand and contribute to civil and community relations at a local, national and global level

2) To prepare students for a world which is:
   • Knowledge rich
   • Global in its outlook and influences
   • Consistently and rapidly changing
   • Complex in its political and economic structures
   • A pervasive ICT environment

and in which students need to deal with issues in:
   • Conflict management
   • Distribution of resources and choices
   • Environment sustainability

(Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority, 2004, p. 5)
While this framework document indicates that these ten values are to be taught and learned, it is contended here that these values do not necessarily have educative value. Indeed the UNESCO document mentioned earlier claims that “Education cannot be satisfied with bringing individuals together by getting them to accept common values shaped in the past. It must also answer the question as to what for and why we live together” (Delors, 1998, p. 61). This latter assertion is clearly absent from the VCAA framework, which requires learners to be compliant to a standard set of values but fails to offer any meaningful vision for why we live together, other than economic imperatives.

It would appear that in addition to the discourse which stresses the relationship that education systems have with national economies, (Lawton and Cowen, 2001, p. 17), the ideology of the global citizen is also present in this document, which when examined in detail, is not that far removed from the ideologies which fuelled various nationalisms through this last century. This is evident when learners are referred to as ‘citizens’, which by definition, essentialises personhood to that of a governed entity. Lawton and Cowen (2001, p. 24) predict that educational aims which focus upon acting according to ideals of the good citizen and the productive worker also usually entails a shift away from notions of the learner as a moral person capable of ethical reasoning and judgment making. Their prediction would appear to be validated by the content of this document.

**Are Values Valuable?**

Educational researchers acknowledge that “the concept of what a value might be is contested and elusive” (Halstead and Taylor, 1996 in Yates, 2000, p. 26). This is certainly most relevant for educators, as Paul Hirst (1965, p. 115) argues that education “necessarily involves considerations of value”. The term ‘value’ can be used as both a noun and a verb and this characteristic demands that educators need to be clear what is actually being taught and how educative value is to be determined.

Objectifying values, as is the manner found in the VCAA document, is also recommended by Talbot (2000, p. 15) who finds it useful to contextualise issues by asking the question “what are values?”. The specific structure of his question centred on ‘what’, invites responses that contribute to notions of principles (rules) and standards (ideals) beyond individual subjectivity. According to MacIntyre (1987) the adoption of values as nouns and as commonly accepted standards makes rational discussion about them possible. Such a positioning would indicate that values could be ‘things’ understood as ‘social facts’ (Durkheim, 1982).

As social facts these values may be regarded as ‘standards’ of quality which have intrinsic worth. Such standards of value have been suggested to be qualities of general education, and even for example more specifically mathematics education, consisting of such characteristics as honesty, rationalism and the habit of getting students to check their answers (Bishop, FitzSimons, Seah & Clarkson, 1999, p. 4). Such descriptions tend to indicate that values have an existence beyond individual persons. They have been stated as phenomena with their own existence which persons need to be aware of, respond to and become committed to, as described in the VCAA framework.
Endeavouring to promote values as common standards can be criticised to be problematic in our pluralist society (Haydon, 1993, p. 14) as a non-existent monoculture is implied. Nietzsche wrote to a great extent about the plurality and genealogy of values, conceptualising them to be items that we can either posit or ‘unposit’. Values are not necessarily valuable and consequently they do not, and cannot, dictate meaning to persons as agents.

This is not simply a characterisation of postmodernity, because even through modernity we never have had values that were able to transmit meaning to us and dictate the way lives were to be lived. A direct implication of this conceptualisation is that as ‘objects’, values have no intrinsic worth. As ‘facts’ they are unable to demonstrate universal goodness.

John Dewey (1958, p. 281) clearly identified this apparent subjective/verb (valuing) and objective/noun (value) divide. He stated that –

The underlying issue here is whether “value” is a noun standing for something that is an entity in its own right or whether the word is adjectival, standing for a property or quality that belongs, under specifiable conditions, to a thing or person having existence independently of being valued. (Dewey, 1958, pp. 276-277)

He identified that if values were extrinsic or “instrumental” then they could be rationally estimated. However, if they were to be regarded as such it needs to be pointed out that they are only means to ends and that these ends “are just matters of what groups, classes, sects, races or whatever, happen irrationally to like or dislike (Dewey, 1958, p. 9).

While his notion of ‘irrationality’ may be more helpfully understood as ‘non-rationality’ he does nevertheless indicate that ‘objectively’ values – as social facts – are problematic. Dewey is often understood to have opposed dichotomies and this is yet another. What he argued for was a “critical engagement” between “individual thought and group sanction” (Kneller, 1971, p. 229). This problematic nature of ‘values’ needs to be carefully considered before promoting them as standards of essential learning to be developed in any educational framework.

The alternative focus that is being offered here is upon valuing rather than values. As a verb it is something that persons are actively engaged with. Something of each person is present and involved in each act of valuing. It is argued here that such valuing is founded upon the intentionality of each person.

An atomistic view of the individual is not subscribed to here as this notion of valuing would then become solipsistic. It is argued that as social beings people have intersubjective common grounds that allow us to form common meanings much as portrayed by the community of scientists who operate from the same paradigm of understanding as found in Thomas Kuhn’s (1970) argument in his book The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. In order to clarify this further and to argue for this alternative focus for educational research it is useful to examine the ethical perspective of consequentialism.
Consequentialism
Values are considered to be an aspect of ethics because they deal with good and bad, right and wrong. Consequentialism and non-consequentialism are two major and quite different perspectives of ethical theory. The former usually indicates that value is to be indicated in the outcome or consequence of an act, while the latter refers to an act itself having value. Non-consequentialism sees intrinsic value in acts which are then considered to be one’s duty such as the practice of the Golden Rule. Such a perspective traditionally referred to as deontological ethics claims that these duties are absolute and universal, and therefore we are obliged to keep them. Immanuel Kant and his notion of the categorical imperative are often associated with this perspective.

Consequentialism on the other hand, is often referred to as teleological theory. The ‘good’ that is achieved from an act can be good for the agent in action or it can be for the good of the many (e.g. John Stuart Mill’s Utilitarianism). Consequentialism often promotes individual freedom and responsibility such as with situationalism. For postmodern times, Bagnall (1998, p. 322, 318) argues that “situationalism is the only truly moral response” because the demise of the modernist ethical theories, codes and rules have left individuals “ethically naked...abandoned... to the contingency of moral circumstances”. It could be concluded then that such a position is the only sensible one to adopt for a pluralistic society such as ours.

While the VCAA document clearly indicates that ‘being ethical’ is one of the ten agreed values, their description of what this entails appears more in keeping with compliant citizenship rather than any notion of moral personhood. The document describes that this value of being ethical means “acting in accordance with generally agreed rules and/or standards for right [moral] conduct or practice”. This of course is more in keeping with a deontological approach which is quite inadequate according to Bagnall and appears to validate Lawton and Cowen’s prediction that an emphasis on the dutiful and productive citizen would marginalize the notion of the learner as a moral person.

The authors of the VCAA document make the claim that their proposed list of agreed values be linked to standards which will be used to measure student development. If values are to be considered as standards or ‘things’ such as ‘facts’, then they exist independently of any individual subjectivity and are universal to all people. As Kierkegaard has argued –

The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which can be put from another point of view by saying that it applies at every moment. It rests immanently in itself, has nothing outside itself that is its telos [end, purpose] but is itself the telos for everything outside”. (Kierkegaard, 1985, p. 83)

Kierkegaard went to great length to argue against the acceptance of such an ethical existence as being how one should live the good life. He demonstrated through the story of Abraham and Isaac that “the single individual now sets himself apart as the particular above the universal” (Kierkegaard, 1985, p. 84). Even though he took a
knife to his son Isaac, Abraham is not condemned as a murder but rather is elevated as father of the faithful. He was justified in breaking the ethical imperative ‘not to murder’ by seeking a greater good. Many other examples could be referred to such as Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn who lied in order to preserve the life of a black slave. It is not suggested here that there exists a hierarchy of values but rather that there can be justifications given for a ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’ - as described by Kierkegaard.

If values are able to be ‘suspended’ in order to elevate the particular above the universal could this potentially lead to nihilism? One philosopher often accused of advancing nihilism especially through his ‘death of God’, is Nietzsche. He challenged his readers to ‘sound out’ the idols of universally assumed givens and asked “Cannot all values be overturned? And is Good perhaps Evil?” (Nietzsche, 1996, p. 7).

Through his ‘free spirits’ Nietzsche proclaimed –

You had to become your own master, and also the master of your own virtues. Previously, your virtues were your masters; but they must be nothing more than your tools… according to your higher purpose. (Nietzsche, 1996, p. 9)

Values then can be considered to be signs of higher purposes or as Charles Taylor (1989) describes, ‘hypergoods’. These are often offered to be the ‘reasons’ for justifying certain valuing and are not used to demonstrate that values have intrinsic value. Persons give meaning and value in the way that they relate as relational beings.

Consequentialism readily demonstrates that particular ‘things’ or principles can never be both accurate and adequate, that is, they can never be so detailed and yet be universally applicable for every context. Even in the more extreme case of ‘do not murder’ for example, it is difficult to universalise its applicability in cases of euthanasia, war of even when a request from a divinity (as per Abraham) requires the sacrifice of an innocent. In these cases agents are pursuing particular purposes based upon their personal intentionality, and it is argued here that educative value is to be located in the intentionality of these agents rather that the values (as objects) themselves.

**Educative value**

It is contended here that not all values have educative value. Dewey has argued that ‘education’, just like ‘value’, is an abstract term and therefore has no ‘aims’ or purposes of and by itself. Dewey (1985, p. 114) asserted that rather it is persons who have aims and purposes which are understood to have value in that they are good for attaining worthwhile ends, and that educative value is not possible to attribute to anything that is abstract.

This may appear to be a rather inconsequential distinction to make. However, the point to be made is that ‘education’ can have several conflicting values associated with ‘its’ aims and purposes simply as a result of the variety of individuals and societies who contribute to the meanings of education. Education itself is normative
not descriptive, recommending what ‘ought’ to be rather than what is. Therefore it is likened to an ethical claim of what ought to be rather than a factual claim of what ‘is’.

The relation between education and ethics has been explored at length by R. S. Peters in his book *Ethics and Education*. Here Peters (1970, p. 28) explained that engaging with the ‘aims of education’ is “a way of getting people to get clear about and focus their attention on what is worthwhile achieving” [my emphasis]. For example ‘honesty’ has often been suggested as a value that some teachers have and that they try to promote. But as an entity of and by itself, does honesty have intrinsic value?

According to the VCAA document it would appear that honesty does have intrinsic value and certainly there are instances, and probably a great many could be put forward to demonstrate how honesty can be worthwhile and how it offers value. Such instances submitted would no doubt refer to the ‘good’ that such a value is able to contribute. However, it is this particular attribute that makes the notion of values so problematic. Can it be more worthwhile in an educational context to be dishonest with learners? Being involved in an educational setting, is there a case for a teacher to lie to students and claim for example that s/he is unable to work out a particular problem that has been set?

I am sure many educators have adopted such strategies and lied to students in order for them to adopt a less dependent approach to their own problem solving and learning. That is a sort of teleological suspension of the ethical as described by Kierkegaard. Dishonesty, then, can have educative value because it can be used as a tool to achieve something educationally valuable. Therefore, it is argued here that neither honesty nor dishonesty have any intrinsic value of and by themselves. Their usefulness to us as educators is determined by our relation to them, that is, how we as agents value their potential as we pursue our personal aims of our educational enterprise.

In one of his well known works on educative aims, Peters (1973, p. 125) argued that “Values are involved in education not so much as goals or end-products, but as principles implicit in different manners of proceeding or producing”. It is the manner rather than the matter that is to provide an important criterion for judging the educative value of an experience. Peters (1973, p. 131) here claimed that pursuing the matter and the ‘ends’ of education, such as self-realization, “encourages an instrumental way of looking at the problem of justification” to the point that “it is erroneously assumed that education must be justified by reference to an end which is extrinsic to it”. This is clearly the approach adopted by the authors of the VCAA document who appeal to ideals of both economics and citizenship to justify their framework of values.

It is contended here that the framework of values as promoted by the VCAA are in fact mis-educative. That is, they restrict the possible growth that can occur for learners that enable them to be critical and intelligent decision makers. As educated persons they should “be a challenge to the status quo” (Pring, 1988, p. 42) and “the citizen’s worst enemy” (Bauman, 2001, p. 26) where ‘enemy’ here is to be understood similarly to Nietzsche’s usage which refers to a positive critical consciousness.
According to Phillips (1971, p. 70), the enterprise of education implies that worthwhile changes must occur within the learner, but “if, for instance, education were merely a means for producing social cohesion or a trained workforce, then educational changes would not be valuable in themselves”. On this point Phillips goes on to reference Dewey who argued that the educational process is its own end and does not have an end beyond itself.

Dewey argued that educative value cannot be attributed to any subject matter in itself (such as the VCAA’s set of values), because if it did, then the implication would be that “the attitude of pupils must, upon the whole, be one of docility, receptivity and obedience” (Dewey, 1938/97, p. 18). He claimed that instead, educative value is to be determined by the two principles of continuity and interaction.

The first principle of continuity refers to the overall development of the being of the learner, as a social, intellectual and moral agent. The educative growth of the learner is to be determined by the type of attitudes s/he develops, especially with regards to continuing to learn.

The second principle of interaction refers to the context of the individual learner in relation to the entities in his/her environment. These entities could be real objects, ideas or ideals – such as the essential values promoted by the VCAA. What is of significance here is the relation that the individual learner has towards these entities. Dewey criticises traditional education for neglecting the internal disposition of the individual learners because it is from the learners’ perspective that meanings are to be formulated.

**Intentionality**

It is argued here that *valuing* is an expression of the intentionality of individual persons. The individual is understood to be a meaning-maker rather than a passive recipient of meaning bestowing entities – such as objective values. As entities who have at least some agency (Kearney, 1987, p. 55-56), learners act in intentional ways. These intentions are part of one’s *whole* being including intuitions, emotions and cognitive understandings. It is argued here that the subjective relations of the individual learners have far greater significance for determining educative value than any entities from which the learners have been decentred. Such an emphasis is reflective of Kierkegaard’s (1992, P. 203) argument that “subjectivity is truth”.

Similarly for Nietzsche (1998, p. 85), there is no ‘truth’ in an absolute sense but “only a perspectival seeing” which makes ‘objectivity’ absurd and a non-concept. Similarly Heidegger opposed the notion that ‘truth’ should be used to represent the correspondence between statement and ‘fact’, and argued that truth should be thought of in terms of the Greek *aletheia* (meaning ‘taking things out of their concealment’). Such a definition of truth means that one can be “in” truth (Heidegger, 1988, p. 18) in this regard when coming to understand a phenomenon, not for what the thing *is* - as Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology attempted to portray - but from the perspective of existential phenomenology, being *in* truth means how a meaning, a phenomenon, is *understood in relation to oneself*. 
A foundation for meaning can be gained through lived experience phenomenologically rather than through a particular philosophy (Garrison, 1987, p. 487) even although on the surface such lived experiences appear “fraught with ambiguity, ambivalence, and contradiction” (Britzman, 1992, p. 25). Being in relation, truth for the individual refers to how one relates to what one understands. The focus of concern for educative value then is how the learner relates, not what is being related to – such as a particular set of values.

This notion of how has major implications for the purposes that one has and according to Dewey (1938, p. 45) it is precisely the purposes of learners which have been neglected by traditional education. Personal identity is gained by how an individual relates and values his or her relations and is not made through objective or abstract categories which relate to the ‘what’ of one’s being. One’s entire identity is only partly able to be revealed by particular values which can be demonstrated and observed and by the actual purposes of education that one may be able to articulate as one’s own.

Such stated aims and values are likened to Nietzsche’s (1998, p. 51) analysis of utilities, in that they are only signs which have a functional meaning attributed to it from a person exercising his or her will. More telling is how one relates to such purposes. This therefore indicates that attention needs to be given to the manner in which teachers, as professional educators, personally relate to their particular meaning and aim of education, that is, their intentionality, with reference to what they understand to be the meaning and purpose of human existence.

This may at first appear to be quite a hyperbole to claim that in order to formulate a clear and professional understanding of educative value, reference must be made to metaphysics. However, this is exactly what is argued by some educators including Postman (1996, p. 27) who argues that the main problem facing education is not technical in nature but metaphysical.

By suggesting that we make intentionality the focus, we are more able to identify educative value. If educators are to engage in the meaning that learners have in valuing certain standards, principles and actions, then they must be willing to engage with learners’ intentionality. As meaning-makers people do not live by meanings which are perceived from sources external to us. We are beings-in-the-world and therefore are intimately involved with any meaning making. Therefore ‘life’, as with ‘education’ – and indeed any proposed framework of education – cannot offer ready-made intentions, meanings and understandings to be ‘unpacked’ (Searle, 1983, p. 27). We need to actively make sense of our experiences and determine what is to be regarded as important, worthwhile and valuable as critical and responsible members of our communities.

**Conclusion**

It has been argued here that the VCAA document which presents a set of values to be taught, is not educationally valuable but is rather mis-educative. In order for there to be educative value, there needs to be a worthwhile interaction between the learner and the various entities in his or her environment. It is in the manner or the how of this interaction that educative value can be established, and this includes the specific
attitudes developed by the learner. It is contended here that such an approach to establishing educative value is dependant upon the professionalism of the individual educators involved in providing suitable environments for particular learners.

However, this professionalism is often marginalised by governmental initiatives to control the curriculum, which is certainly not a recent phenomenon. According to Dewey,

Traditional education did not have to face this problem [i.e. determining the educative value of experiences]; it could systematically dodge this responsibility. The school environment of desks, blackboards, a small school yard, was supposed to suffice. There was no demand that the teacher should become intimately acquainted with the conditions of the local community, physical, historical, economic, occupational, etc., in order to utilize them as educational resources. (Dewey, 1938/97, p. 40)

What Dewey is referring to here is the lack of acknowledgement given by traditional education systems to the professionalism of the individual teachers to conduct situational analyses and make judgements as to the appropriateness of certain experiences for particular learners. Such a controlling bureaucratic approach effectively nullifies debate as to the educative value of its provision of resources and proposed curriculum, which is argued here to be also reflected in the VCAA's approach to values.

There is a noticeable absence in the opportunity for professional teachers to determine how the educative value of such values might be determined in their own particular contexts. By presenting their list of values (which are particularly suited to compliant citizenship and productive workers) as those values widely shared by Australian school communities, the authors of this VCAA document have effectively nullified any further examination of them, because to do so would place the questioner at odds with what is being the assumed position of the nation’s majority of school communities.

If educators are to retain a healthy level of professionalism within the teaching fraternity, we should take up Nietzsche’s challenge to sound out these values for the specific purpose of determining how their educative value is to be determined. Otherwise if we adopt an all-too-ready mindset of passive and docile acceptance of this proposed list of values, then these are likely to become blindly accepted instruments of things we think with, rather than entities with which we intelligently think about in a most educationally valuably manner.

References


