Unit 8 – Learning and Education

Podcast text

Hello and welcome to the podcast for Unit 8 of Sociology 1101. Today, we will be discussing issues of learning and education. Sociologists pay attention to learning and education for several reasons. First, as we saw in the unit on socialization, the human ability to learn is remarkable, and our learning experiences shape us both as individuals and as societies. Second, today's society has been described as an "information society" or a "knowledge society", which means that today, more than ever, learning is critical for success. Third, learning and education are how we try to collectively shape our future – giving young people the tools we think they need to in order to carry society forward.

The modern approach to education and learning is historically unusual. For most of human history, formal education was something that was reserved for the elite. If we go back only a few hundred years, only the children of aristocrats, nobles, and wealthy merchants received an education. This education was also structured differently than it is today. Children were taught by tutors, and education overwhelmingly focused on learning how to speak and read different languages – including Latin and Ancient Greek. The only formal education institutions were universities, which were basically places where wealthy young adults could mingle and socialize. Professors were paid at every lecture (they put a hat or a pot out in front of them, like street performers), and there were no grades or assignments like today. Universities were centres of learning, but nowhere near as structured as we see today. If someone wanted to become a tradesperson, like a mason, a tanner, or a blacksmith, he became an apprentice and learned on the job.

In contrast, the education system of today is highly formalized, with set curricula, professional teachers, grading criteria, and huge bureaucracies. Whereas most people in the past received little or no education, today children are required to have at least 12 years of schooling, and most have between 15 and 20! All this formal schooling has led some sociologists to describe the education system as a "total institution", which refers to an institution that dominates the whole lives of people who are caught up in it. When you think about it, the closest corollary to the education system is a prison, in terms of the amount of time people physically spend at school, how schools determine young people's social networks, and the effect it has on socialization.

Given the importance of education – and the amount of time children spend "being educated" – there are longstanding debates about how best to teach children. One of the most important and long-running debates has to do with the basic approach to teaching – or what is sometimes called the **pedagogical orientation** of the education system.

The more conservative approach to teaching assumes that students are like "empty vessels", or empty containers. It assumes that when students enter the classroom or the lecture hall, they are empty of relevant knowledge. It is the job of the teacher or the professor, who holds the knowledge, to transfer it to the student. Over the course of a semester or school year, the empty container is gradually filled, until the student contains the relevant knowledge and can then carry it onto the next course and eventually into the job market. Advocates of this approach tend to argue that education should focus on the three "r's" – reading, writing, and arithmetic. They also typically argue that the curriculum should be set in advance, taught the same way in every classroom and school, and that students should be frequently tested using standardized tests so that everyone's progress can be measured and compared.

People who have a more radical view of education criticize the "empty vessel" model on a few fronts. First of all, they argue that the assumption that students know nothing is false. In everything from English to mathematics, students bring existing knowledge into the class, and education would work better if it recognized that. Second, they argue that the assumption that the teacher has perfect knowledge, and that it is his or her job to transfer it uni-directionally to the student, is also false. The empty vessel model has little patience for "grey areas." It assumes that students should only ask questions for clarification, not to challenge teachers or add to the discussion (because the curriculum is set). Third, critics argue that the empty-vessel model turns a lot of students off because it doesn't connect with their lives. Standardized tests, they argue, only measure things like memorization and repetition, and are useless for equally important things like creativity and judgement.

Advocates of more radical forms of education tend to see learning as an open-ended and exploratory process that is different for different people. One of the most influential writers on radical pedagogy was the Brazilian sociologist, Paolo Friere, who published an enormously influential book in 1970 entitled *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* Friere argued that the conservative "empty vessel" approach to education was dehumanizing, because it assumed that people could be programmed no differently than computers or robots. Instead, he saw education as potentially revolutionary if done properly. For him, learning was about bringing different perspectives together. Rather than seeing the teacher as the "source" of all knowledge, he saw teachers as guides who could help students to better understand their own lives, and how their knowledge fit in with those of great thinkers and philosophers. In other words, he saw education as a *process* rather than as a *result*. Education was about becoming aware of history, context, and relations – rather than memorizing concepts, words, and formulae.

Interestingly, education policies in Ontario and elsewhere routinely shift between the two views. When I went through elementary school in the 1980s, the curriculum was heavily influenced by

Friere and other radical thinkers. By the mid-1990s, the Progressive Conservative government of Mike Harris had returned to rigid grade-by-grade learning plans and standardized testing. In the 2000s, the pendulum back towards the radical approach, but not quite to the degree of the 1980s. This is clearly an ongoing debate.

Sociologists also pay attention to the role that education plays beyond the schools. Generally speaking, most people agree that it is a good thing to have a highly-educated population. But is there a downside to all this schooling? Some sociologists say yes.

First of all, having a lot of schooling and a lot of highly-educated people doesn't necessarily change the labour market or the composition of the economy. For example, training more lawyers does not immediately create a demand for more lawyers. This means that some highly-educated people end up being **under-employed**, or doing work that is far below their educational attainment. The flip side of this trend is something called **credential inflation**. For example, when my parents entered the workforce in the 1960s, someone with a high school degree could easily get a job in an office – as a clerk, a bookkeeper, or even a manager. That would be nearly impossible today. As the population becomes more educated, employers are asking for higher credentials as conditions for entry. For my generation, a Bachelor's degree was enough to get nearly any "good job". Some people now argue that a Master's is the new Bachelor's (although I'm not convinced that in all cases it is). This isn't to say that people shouldn't pursue education, but that the link between education and the labour market is not clear-cut.

Another potential downside is that education has come to stand in for learning. Education and learning *are not the same thing*. In fact, some sociologists argue that most learning takes place outside of school. However, education has become the *only socially sanctioned form of learning*. Let me give you an example. My great-grandfather worked as a machine designer and builder in Hamilton, Ontario – he helped to create machines that were then put into use in the steel mills. He, like many of his generation, never went to school for this. He was *self-taught*, meaning that he learned through books and by tinkering in his own shop. He was hired by the steel companies on this basis, and made a fine career for himself. This would be unthinkable today. While many people are still self-taught, it is next to impossible to convince an employer of their skill without a formal **credential**. If my great-grandfather were alive today and trying to get the same career, he would need at least a Master's degree in Mechanical Engineering. This is called **credentialism –** where the possession of a formal credential is more important than the skill itself. The sociologist David Livingstone argues that credentialism in fact has a huge cost to the economy because it idles many people who have huge talents but who don't have a piece of paper to validate them.

