CHAPTER 4

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR DEMOCRATIC LEARNING

4. INTRODUCTION

In Chapter Three we discussed the general fundamental principles of democratic learning and considered a variety of ways that contemporary human capital education policy and curricula from the US, Australia and Canada potentially undermine their practice. In the final two chapters we will outline in increasingly greater detail some of the philosophies, epistemologies and practical strategies for human capital and career education that promote democratic learning practices.

We begin the present chapter by defending the student-centred elements of progressive education as essential components of democratic learning in education against a range of contemporary attacks. Progressivism and student-centred learning practices have been recently on the receiving end of concerted challenges from conservative critics such as Dianne Ravitch, E. D. Hirsch, Kieran Egan and a number of contemporary character education proponents for being pedagogically ineffective, conceptually confused and morally bankrupt. While we share Egan’s concerns regarding the confusions present in some of progressive education’s more popular concepts, we also believe the criticisms advanced by these attacks uniformly neglect the democratic dispositions achieved through the student-centred practices of progressive education. Hence, we will argue in this chapter that the character outcomes of progressive education provide essential ingredients in education programs designed to foster participatory democratic citizenship among students.

We will also explore in Chapter Four the constructivist classroom practices that create the dispositions among students required to meet the
agency requirements of meaningful democratic citizenship. The dispositions forged through progressive and constructivist learning approaches contribute to the critical engagement of learners and are therefore consistent with the democratic principles of learning we identified in Chapter Three. We explore different constructivist learning approaches and consider what each might contribute to a democratically structured career education classroom. Finally, we discuss the importance of epistemic orientation in creating a democratic classroom and propose an internalist epistemology to promote critical dispositions and knowledge ownership among career education students. Internalism requires knowing agents to possess an explanatory understanding of their various truth claims rather than relying on information provided by some external authority.

4.1 Progressive Education and Democratic Learning

Progressive education was founded on the promise of democratic social progress envisioned by Dewey and other socially concerned educators of his period. The movement has always had its critics – some of whom we will discuss later in this chapter – but recent conservative attacks on progressivism have gained a disturbing momentum in contemporary scholarship. Progressivism is presently under attack by noted scholars such as Dianne Ravitch, Kieran Egan and E. D. Hirsch as the major cause of low academic achievement and growing social stratification. Recently, and within the US in particular, some proponents of character education have added to this criticism by blaming John Dewey and progressive education for the general moral decline in American schools and society (Davis, 2003; Smagorinsky & Taxel, 2005). In this section we defend progressivism’s student-centred learning practices against these charges based on their consistency with the principles of democratic learning we outlined in Chapter Three.

Ravitch attacks student-centred learning strategies as self-indulgent and lacking the required academic rigour and assessment procedures that she believes are necessary to afford students a quality academic experience. Hirsch regards progressive education practices as even more whimsical, suggesting they reflect an unrealistic romantic retreat into the model of childhood learning espoused by 18th century French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau. In Getting It Wrong From The Beginning: Our Progressivist Inheritance From Herbert Spencer, Jean Piaget and John Dewey, Egan (2002) challenges the developmental learning assumptions adopted by Piaget and Dewey, and highlights the confusion surrounding concepts such as active learning, rote learning and natural learning. Although some of the points Egan raises identify legitimate concerns about certain conceptual