

## **Educational Philosophies Definitions and Comparison Chart**

Within the epistemological frame that focuses on the nature of knowledge and how we come to know, there are four major educational philosophies, each related to one or more of the general or world philosophies just discussed. These educational philosophical approaches are currently used in classrooms the world over. They are Perennialism, Essentialism, Progressivism, and Reconstructionism. These educational philosophies focus heavily on WHAT we should teach, the curriculum aspect.

### **Perennialism**

For Perennialists, the aim of education is to ensure that students acquire understandings about the great ideas of Western civilization. These ideas have the potential for solving problems in any era. The focus is to teach ideas that are everlasting, to seek enduring truths which are constant, not changing, as the natural and human worlds at their most essential level, do not change. Teaching these unchanging principles is critical. Humans are rational beings, and their minds need to be developed. Thus, cultivation of the intellect is the highest priority in a worthwhile education. The demanding curriculum focuses on attaining cultural literacy, stressing students' growth in enduring disciplines. The loftiest accomplishments of humankind are emphasized— the great works of literature and art, the laws or principles of science. Advocates of this educational philosophy are Robert Maynard Hutchins who developed a Great Books program in 1963 and Mortimer Adler, who further developed this curriculum based on 100 great books of western civilization.

### **Essentialism**

Essentialists believe that there is a common core of knowledge that needs to be transmitted to students in a systematic, disciplined way. The emphasis in this conservative perspective is on intellectual and moral standards that schools should teach. The core of the curriculum is essential knowledge and skills and academic rigor. Although this educational philosophy is similar in some ways to Perennialism, Essentialists accept the idea that this core curriculum may change. Schooling should be practical, preparing students to become valuable members of society. It should focus on facts—the objective reality out there—and "the basics," training students to read, write, speak, and compute clearly and logically. Schools should not try to set or influence policies. Students should be taught hard work, respect for authority, and discipline. Teachers are to help students keep their non-productive instincts in check, such as aggression or mindlessness. This approach was in reaction to progressivist approaches prevalent in the 1920s and 30s. William Bagley, took progressivist approaches to task in the journal he formed in 1934. Other proponents of Essentialism are: James D. Koerner (1959), H. G. Rickover (1959), Paul Copperman (1978), and TheodoreSizer (1985).

### **Progressivism**

Progressivists believe that education should focus on the whole child, rather than on the content or the teacher. This educational philosophy stresses that students should test ideas by active experimentation. Learning is rooted in the questions of learners that arise through experiencing the world. It is active, not passive. The learner is a problem solver and thinker who makes meaning through his or her individual experience in the physical and cultural context. Effective teachers provide experiences so that students can learn by doing. Curriculum content is derived from student interests and questions. The scientific method is used by progressivist educators so that students can study matter and events systematically and first hand. The emphasis is on process—how one comes to know. The Progressive education philosophy was established in America from the mid 1920s through the mid 1950s. John Dewey was its foremost proponent.

One of his tenets was that the school should improve the way of life of our citizens through experiencing freedom and democracy in schools. Shared decision making, planning of teachers with students, student-selected topics are all aspects. Books are tools, rather than authority.

### **Reconstructionism/Critical Theory**

Social reconstructionism is a philosophy that emphasizes the addressing of social questions and a quest to create a better society and worldwide democracy. Reconstructionist educators focus on a curriculum that highlights social reform as the aim of education. Theodore Brameld (1904-1987) was the founder of social reconstructionism, in reaction against the realities of World War II. He recognized the potential for either human annihilation through technology and human cruelty or the capacity to create a beneficent society using technology and human compassion. George Counts (1889-1974) recognized that education was the means of preparing people for creating this new social order.

Critical theorists, like social reconstructionists, believe that systems must be changed to overcome oppression and improve human conditions. Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was a Brazilian whose experiences living in poverty led him to champion education and literacy as the vehicle for social change. In his view, humans must learn to resist oppression and not become its victims, nor oppress others. To do so requires dialog and critical consciousness, the development of awareness to overcome domination and oppression. Rather than "teaching as banking," in which the educator deposits information into students' heads, Freire saw teaching and learning as a process of inquiry in which the child must invent and reinvent the world.

For social reconstructionists and critical theorists, curriculum focuses on student experience and taking social action on real problems, such as violence, hunger, international terrorism, inflation, and inequality. Strategies for dealing with controversial issues (particularly in social studies and literature), inquiry, dialogue, and multiple perspectives are the focus. Community-based learning and bringing the world into the classroom are also strategies.

### **Eclecticism**

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

**Eclecticism** is a conceptual approach that does not hold rigidly to a single paradigm or set of assumptions, but instead draws upon multiple theories, styles, or ideas to gain complementary insights into a subject, or applies different theories in particular cases.

It can be inelegant, and eclectics are sometimes criticised for lack of consistency in their thinking, but it is common in many fields of study. For example, most psychologists accept parts of behaviorism, but do not attempt to use the theory to explain all aspects of human behavior. A statistician may use frequentist techniques on one occasion and Bayesian ones on another. An example of eclecticism in economics is John Dunning's eclectic theory of international production.

### **Existentialism**

"Childhood is not adulthood; childhood is playing and no child ever gets enough play. The Summerhill theory is that when a child has played enough he will start to work and face difficulties, and I claim that this theory has been vindicated in our pupils' ability to do a good job even when it involves a lot of unpleasant work."



- A. S. Neill

Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism.' '



- Jean Paul Sartre

### Existentialism as a Philosophical Term

The existentialist movement in education is based on an intellectual attitude that philosophers term existentialism. Born in nineteenth-century Europe, existentialism is associated with such diverse thinkers as

- Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), a passionate Christian, and



- Friedrich Nietzsche (1811 1900)

who wrote a book entitled **The Antichrist** and coined the phrase God is dead. While the famous existentialists would passionately disagree with one another on many basic philosophical issues, what they shared was a respect for individualism. In particular, they argued that traditional approaches to philosophy do not adequately respect the unique concerns of each individual.

Jean Paul Sartre's classic formulation of existentialism--that "existence precedes essence"--means that there exists no universal, inborn human nature. We are born and exist, and then we ourselves freely determine our essence (that is, our innermost nature). Some philosophers commonly associated with the existentialist tradition never fully adopted the "existence precedes essence" principle. Nevertheless, that principle is fundamental to the educational existentialist movement.

### Existentialism as an Educational Philosophy

Just as its namesake sprang from a strong rejection of traditional philosophy, educational existentialism sprang from a strong rejection of the traditional, essentialist approach to education. Existentialism rejects the existence of any source of objective, authoritative truth about metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Instead, individuals are responsible for

determining for themselves what is "true" or "false," "right" or "wrong," "beautiful" or "ugly." For the existentialist, there exists no universal form of human nature; each of us has the free will to develop as we see fit.

In the existentialist classroom, subject matter takes second place to helping the students understand and appreciate themselves as unique individuals who accept complete responsibility for their thoughts, feelings, and actions. The teacher's role is to help students define their own essence by exposing them to various paths they may take in life and creating an environment in which they may freely choose their own preferred way. Since feeling is not divorced from reason in decision making, the existentialist demands the education of the whole person, not just the mind.

Although many existentialist educators provide some curricular structure, existentialism, more than other educational philosophies, affords students great latitude in their choice of subject matter. In an existentialist curriculum, students are given a wide variety of options from which to choose.

To the extent that the staff, rather than the students, influence the curriculum, the humanities are commonly given tremendous emphasis. They are explored as a means of providing students with vicarious experiences that will help unleash their own creativity and self-expression. For example, rather than emphasizing historical events, existentialists focus upon the actions of historical individuals, each of whom provides possible models for the students' own behavior. In contrast to the humanities, math and the natural sciences may be de-emphasized, presumably because their subject matter would be considered "cold," "dry," "objective," and therefore less fruitful to self-awareness. Moreover, vocational education is regarded more as a means of teaching students about themselves and their potential than of earning a livelihood. In teaching art, existentialism encourages individual creativity and imagination more than copying and imitating established models.

Existentialist methods focus on the individual. Learning is self-paced, self directed, and includes a great deal of individual contact with the teacher, who relates to each student openly and honestly. Although elements of existentialism occasionally appear in public schools, this philosophy has found wider acceptance in private schools and in alternative public schools founded in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

## Comparison of Attributes of Educational Philosophies

Categories	Traditional		Contemporary	
	<i>Realism</i>	<i>Idealism &amp; Realism</i>	<i>Pragmatism</i>	<i>Pragmatism</i>
<b>Philosophical - orientation</b>	<i>Realism</i>	<i>Idealism &amp; Realism</i>	<i>Pragmatism</i>	<i>Pragmatism</i>
<b>Theoretical-orientation</b>	<i>Perennialism</i>	<i>Essentialism</i>	<i>Progressivism</i>	<i>Reconstructionism</i>
<b>Direction in time</b>	preserving the past		growth, reconstruct present, change society, shape future	
<b>Educational value</b>	fixed, absolute, objective		changeable, subjective, relative	
<b>Educational process</b>	focuses on teaching		focuses on active self-learning	
<b>Intellectual focus</b>	train, discipline the mind		engage in problem-solving, social tasks	
<b>Subject-matter</b>	for its own self-importance		all have similar value	
<b>Curriculum</b>	composed of three Rs		three Rs, arts, sciences, vocational	
<b>Learning</b>	cognitive learning, disciplines		exploratory, discovery	
<b>Grouping</b>	homogeneous		heterogeneous, culturally diverse	
<b>Teacher</b>	disseminates, lectures, dominates instruction		facilitates, coaches, change agent	
<b>Student</b>	receptacle, receives knowledge, passive		engages discoverer, constructs knowledge	
<b>Social</b>	direction, control, restraint		Individualism	
<b>Citizenship</b>	cognitive, personal development		personal, social development	
<b>Freedom and Democracy</b>	conformity, compliance with authority, knowledge and discipline		creativity, self-actualization, direct experiences	
<b>Excellence vs. Equality</b>	excellence in education, academic, rewards and jobs based on merit		equality of education, equal change to disadvantaged	
<b>Society</b>	group values, acceptance of norms, cooperative and conforming behavior		individual growth, individual ability, importance of individual	

Adapted from Ornstein's and Oliva's Educational Philosophies. From the dissertation of Dr. David E. Diehl entitled "A Study of Faculty-Related Variables and Competence in Integrating Instructional Technologies into Pedagogical Practices."  
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