

LEARNING AND STUDY AS VALUES IN THE CONTEXT OF STUDENT SURVEY STATEMENTS

1. Introduction

A student in the year 2015 is a person born at the end of the nineties in the previous century and belongs to the generation labelled as 'Z' (short for Polish "Zawsze online" - always online) or 'C' (stemming from *connected* or *change*)¹. *These terms describe clearly the generation of the digital era as being continually accompanied by mobile devices (such as iPhones®, iPods®, iPads®) that allow them to be continuously present and active in the social media. This enables young people to contact others instantly and mutually exchange information about things happening here and now, on the spot. This generation of students matures in "the era of a very fast technological transformation that alters the face of civilization (...)* in two realities, actual and virtual. Personal computers are "their world" and on most occasions they have better knowledge of them than previous generations. The internet serves mainly as entertainment, though they can use its potential to study and work (...) ².

In the light of the above-mentioned characteristics of the digital era youth, a question arises about values important for the students of the twenty first century. As Małgorzata Dubis points out: "values recognised by a person are a factor decisive for his conduct. They (...) determine the selection of life goals and create the basic criteria for choices made when a situation calls for them. Furthermore, they assign a meaning to life. This is essential to function in this world"³.

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¹ <http://kariera.pracuj.pl/porady/czy-nalezy-bac-sie-pokolenia-z/> (access: 2.11.2015).

² W. Wrzesień, *Czy pokoleniowość nam się nie przydarzy? Kilka uwag o współczesnej polskiej młodzieży*, "Nauka" 2007, no. 3, p. 141.

³ M. Dubis, *Wartości i style życia młodzieży*, "Jagiellońskie Studia Socjologiczne" 2014, no. 1, p. 35-45.

The essence of value and how to assess value, which are points of interest for philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, educators and linguists, have not been defined univocally⁴. Dictionaries by W. Doroszewski and M. Szymczak show a difference between a value understood as “how much something is worth financially”⁵ and value as a feature or a set of features characteristic for a person: “the ones that constitute his or her moral, usable, scientific and artistic virtue”⁶. Value is the synonym of importance, meaning of something for somebody; the total of what constitutes a target for that person, the target he or she strives for and wants to achieve”⁷.

Sociology recognises value as “any object material or ideal, an idea or an institution, a real or an imaginary object towards which individuals or communities turn to with respect, attribute an important role to it and experience the strive for it as compulsory. Values are those objects or states of affairs that satisfy (...) individuals or communities, which strived for or achieved bring the sense of duty well fulfilled (...)”⁸.

In philosophy value “is the basic axiological category, and means all that is valuable and desirable, that is the aim to pursue”⁹.

The reflections related to the statements made by the students and presented here attempt to establish whether learning and studying are important to them, whether they are values¹⁰, and if such is the case whether these values are autotelic (those that are a target themselves) or instrumental (serving other values and targets).

Knowledge precedes science and science is just that knowledge verified and systematised. Owing to knowledge, a man inspired by his desires may shape the world he lives in (...), knowledge gives a man not only the possibility to act effectively but also the feeling of security. A person feels

⁴ For example: S. Ossowski, *Dzieła*, vol. 3: *Z zagadnień psychologii społecznej*, Warszawa 1967; M. Misztal, *Problematyka wartości w socjologii*, Warszawa 1980; W. Stróżewski, *Istnienie i wartość*, Kraków 1981; J. Tischner, *Myślenie według wartości*, Kraków 1982; *Człowiek i świat wartości*, ed. J. Lipiec, Kraków 1982; J. Lipiec, *W przestrzeni wartości*, Kraków 1992; J. Puzynina, *Język wartości*, Warszawa 1992; W. Cichoń, *Wartości, człowiek, wychowanie. Zarys problematyki aksjologiczno-wychowawczej*, Kraków 1996; W. Tatarkiewicz, *Historia filozofii*, vol. 1-3, ed. 19, Warszawa 2002; K. Chałas, *Wychowanie ku wartościom. Elementy teorii i praktyki*, Lublin-Kielce 2003; *Człowiek, wartości, pedagogika*, ed. M. Nowicka-Kozioł, Kraków 2007; H. Kurczab, *Z problemów wartości i wartościowania (wybrane zagadnienia)*, “Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego. Seria filologiczna. Dydaktyka7” 2012, no. 72, p. 7-37.

⁵ <http://sjp.pwn.pl/doroszewski/wartosc;5514074.html> (access: 30.01.2016); *Słownik języka polskiego*, ed. M. Szymczak, vol. 3, Warszawa 1985, p. 660.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ C. Kupisiewicz, M. Kupisiewicz, *Słownik pedagogiczny*, Warszawa 2009, p. 189.

⁸ J. Szczepański, *Elementarne pojęcia socjologii*, Warszawa 1970, p. 97-98.

⁹ <http://encyklopedia.pwn.pl/haslo/wartosc;3994143.html> (access: 30.01.2016).

¹⁰ Value understood as what is important and significant for a student that takes up the public administration studies.

simply confident, and by the same token secure, when he or she has the knowledge of people and objects surrounding him or her as well as about processes that occur and phenomena that exist¹¹.

Until recently, tertiary education meant for a person to be qualified as intellectual elite. The master's degree was significant and education had primarily autotelic value. Yet tertiary education has become common and the prestige of the master's degree has fallen into decline. As a result, nowadays, the choices made by former lower secondary school students choosing their course of study are determined by the labour market in the first place (an opportunity to find occupation and develop professionally) and particularly by the labour market demands (employers continually search for educated employees possessing new, attractive skills and qualifications). When a modern student takes a decision to start tertiary education, he or she takes a specific decision determined by various factors (economic and social *inter alia*).

Such was also the choice made by the students who started their tertiary education course in public administration at State Higher Vocational School in Tarnów¹² in academic year 2015/16. Their anonymous, written statements are the basic source for the hereby presented analysis of issues related to learning and studying as a value for a young individual.

The choice of this target group was not accidental since public administration is the course most willingly applied for by upper secondary school graduates, the number of which exceeds the number of first year places offered by the school. The 120 students in the first grade of full-time studies were requested to express their views on two issues i.e. learning and study. These issues were presented in the form of the following unfinished sentences: *It's worth learning because ...* and: *I study because...*

Each of the verbs related to learning and studying has various meanings. The verb *learn* is used with two meanings: 1. *to absorb a certain amount of knowledge, to master a skill*; 2. *to introduce somebody to something, to follow the example of somebody or something, to draw conclusions from experience*¹³.

The meaning of the verb *study* is related to the following actions: 1. *to learn at a university*; 2. *to scrutinise, to research into something*; 3. *to make oneself familiar with something by careful observation or reading*¹⁴.

¹¹ J. Sztumski, *Wiedza jako wartość*, "Res Humana" 2004, no. 3, p. 6.

¹² The first level public administration course has been available at SHVS in Tarnow since the academic year 2000/2001. In the academic year 2015/16 students have the opportunity to continue their education at second level studies. The course offers: internal security administration, international and EU administration with French.

¹³ <http://sjp.pwn.pl/sjp/uczyc-sie;2532020.html> (access: 14.11.2015).

¹⁴ <http://sjp.pwn.pl/sjp/studiowac;2576386.html> (access: 14.11.2015).

Therefore the students had the possibility to define the range of meanings of both of these words in greater detail by adding their reasons behind two statements quoting these particular verbs (*It's worth learning because ...* and: *I study because ...*). The characteristic feature of the students' responses was the length of their statements. What resulted undeniably is that the students are aware how significant their learning and studying are. The importance of learning and study is also reflected in various arguments proving that the university students "constitute (...) the natural, though not always sufficiently appreciated capital of every society and are a particular social barometer which voices the opinion of a considerable part of the society"¹⁵.

Thus the arguments quoted by the students create a particular picture of the goals, aspirations and motivations of these young people who are launching their studies in the academic year 2015/2016. The analysis of their statements allows us to point out a few categories of values which the students regard as significant and related to learning and studying.

2. Learning as an instrumental value

Students are pragmatic people in the first place. They know perfectly well why it is worth learning and they are aware that it is something *progress demands*¹⁶; knowledge lets them rise above the average: *the acquired knowledge helps in your life*. For them learning, gaining knowledge is equivalent to receiving measurable benefits in the future because *learning is an investment in myself*. Statements occur where students also point out that the knowledge and education that one acquires increase his or her chances in the labour market as it is just the *knowledge that allows (...) to make a good impression on other people; it enhances our image and the way it is estimated by another individual*.

A very frequent argument which one came across in their statements is that they learn to have a *better future* since *knowledge provides a better start to life; knowledge gives you better opportunities to find a job; knowledge can be used in practice, knowledge pays in the future*. Their future is inseparably connected with work, therefore they study *to improve their status in the labour market; to have better chances in the labour market and an opportunity to find a well-paid job, to find a job easily, to earn more* since it is *through knowledge that you can get a good job that pays more*.

The students pointed out the practical aspects of learning and stressed that due to the knowledge they acquire they will be able to "comment

¹⁵ T. Strózik, *System wartości a ocena jakości życia młodzieży akademickiej w świetle badań ankietowych studentów uczelni Poznania*, "Studia Oeconomica Posnaniensia" 2014, vol. 2, no. 2, p. 7.

¹⁶ The actual students' statements have been quoted here and further.

on various issues; have their own opinion; to 'knock somebody for a loop' with their knowledge, to get satisfaction when we are knowledgeable answering someone's question on a subject; nobody will be able to talk me into some sort of rubbish; get to know the world; live in the society; adapt to the changing environment; manage in various situations; manage with many problems; due to the knowledge you acquire it is easier to achieve the target you have chosen; it is easier to run an errand e.g. in an office". Thus they will be, as they point out themselves, people who are: "educated, intelligent, more intelligent, wise, wiser, creative, outspoken, confident, more confident in one's future, independent, of good self-esteem, versatile, conscious, happy. Through knowledge we simply become better individuals, we can offer more to both ourselves and our community, we don't feel inferior, knowledge lets us realize our potential in many fields and be successful".

The practical application of knowledge was also been noticed by the students when they mention, among other things, that "you can help someone who knows less and wants to learn, to help somebody who doesn't have the knowledge we've got, through learning we can get to know what we need, in the future we will be able to help children with their education".

The students' statements also referred to the economic emigration of young people and their job search abroad. The students emphasised that it is worth studying since it facilitates *getting a good job abroad*. Simultaneously, they still seem to appreciate the opportunity to study in their own country since there were also statements such as: "after two years I've spent abroad it is better to come back to our country to get better education and an opportunity to work at home".

Therefore learning is an important value. The students attribute a substantial role to it (*it is fundamental to the long-term economic stability*) but the drive for knowledge is conditioned by many practical aspects primarily by the hope to get a job at home as well as abroad. Therefore learning is a must, a necessity, a means to achieve an established target in the reality they live in. They study so that in the future they can *use their knowledge for their own benefit and make decisions more easily but above all to achieve a life-long economic stability* because better knowledge means a *better start in your life*.

3. Learning as an autotelic value

It results that few students appreciate the value of learning as a target in itself, *for your own satisfaction*. One of the respondents pointed out accurately that *learning makes me a little bit of an explorer, because learning broadens your mind, knowledge, skills, interests, it gives an opportunity to find answers to niggling questions*.

Learning is connected with the students' scientific ambitions, with the possibility to gain specialist knowledge in a field of study with the aim to continue their studies at the second or even third level of education. These comments are not common though. Despite this, it is worth having a closer look at them because they present many apt observations. The students claim that *if a person does not develop he or she regresses, yet progress not regress should be the aim in the life of a thinking human being, because then our life becomes more interesting and we do not stand in a dead spot.*

Thus learning allows them to *develop their skills, passions, broaden their horizons; because by exploring a field of study we become wiser and as such more satisfied with our self-esteem.*

Such responses were infrequent though and a vast majority of students treat learning as an instrumental value.

4. Study as an instrumental value

A vast majority of the surveyed students claimed, in their comments, that they study with a target in mind, to achieve something, to benefit from it in the future.

The students are aware of the current situation in the labour market (e.g. *I study because I stand no chance to find a job with the present education, I have only the secondary school-leaving exam, I've graduated from the grammar school only and I don't have any professional training therefore I cannot start work*). Thus, on the one hand, they treat their studies as a way to postpone the moment when they enter the labour market and on the other hand, they expect the benefits that come from the studies they have taken up.

Consequently, they pay attention to the possibility of acquiring knowledge, skills and competences that carry weight in the labour market, such that will facilitate finding an interesting, well-paid job and increase the chance of professional development. Students launch their studies with the future on their mind. Particular statements confirm this fact as among the most common reason that influence the students to take up studies. The following other reasons appear too: *it is better to have the tertiary education because it will surely help me look for a job; when I complete the studies the opportunity to find a job increases; I want to improve my professional qualifications and find a good job; I want to broaden my knowledge and acquire practical skills that will help me with my job later; I want to study so that I can get promoted to higher positions when I start work later, to have better perspectives; in the future I want to occupy a position at an adequate level; I want to find a good job without going abroad.*

The economic factor is also important. It is confirmed by statements such as the following: *I count on a better remuneration in the future; I want to have a well-paid job; I want to earn much in the future; I want to earn money; I want to earn more; I want my economic situation to improve.* It occurs though that the plans the students make to ensure the adequate economic status cover not only themselves but also their relatives e.g. *I'd like to help my parents in the future thanks to a better job and better earnings; I'd like my future family to have a good life.*

In the students' opinion, graduation will let them *have economic stability in the future.* This stability is obviously conditioned by finding employment. However some responses show that students know perfectly well what kind of work they want to do in the future, e.g. *the course in administration (completed) gives me 8 more points on the application list for police force recruitment, in the future I'd like to become a police officer and I think that this course will help me with the job; I want to set up my own business; my course is able to teach me how to set up my own company; I'd rather work in an office.*

The undergraduate status gives young people *the opportunity to get a scholarship* but first of all it allows to benefit from many price reductions e.g. *I have various discounts; I have student discounts; I have cheaper bus tickets and some other discounts; I get public transport discounts.* With all honesty they admit that they study in order to *receive the family benefit.* Few of them stress also that in the course of their studies they can *set off for a student exchange and have a fascinating adventure, meet people.* At the same time they seem to note the benefits of being mobile across borders.

The students also draw our attention to the fact that what made them take the decision to start studying was the will to *meet people; make new acquaintances; because the relationships you establish in the course of your studies are life-long.* Some admit that they study also because they want *their parents to be proud of them.* For many young people the academic period is the time to test themselves: *I wanted to see what it meant to live on my own, earn a living on my own, learn how to be responsible, become more self-sufficient.* On some occasions they started studying due to the social pressure: *I study to avoid being excluded from the circles that claim that you have nothing without a degree; the majority in my family are academic graduates,* and also to be part of a group that is somehow distinguished: *I study in order to join the elite; I have always dreamt of a master's degree before my name.*

Therefore the decision to take up studies stemmed mainly from practical reasons (to acquire knowledge, skills and competences necessary to get a job) or for pretentious reasons (the master's degree is supposed to be the key to the working world and to the elite group of high school graduates), or indeed for both.

5. Study as an autotelic value

It is worth starting to discuss this value with a few quotations from the survey: *in Poland education is still the measure that you value people with, higher education is valuable these days*. Statements like these, where young people stress the value and importance of studying are not common. Studies, as well as learning, have the intrinsic value only to a limited group of students who focus on the fact that: *I study for myself; learning has a future potential; I study because I love learning; I want to study, develop, broaden my knowledge; what I need is development, personal fulfilment; I want to acquire more knowledge and skills*. These statements are important as they point out the fact that the main factor influencing the decision to take up studies was the need for improvement and continuous development, the need to acquire and extend their knowledge. These statements prove, as well, that the students who appreciate the intrinsic value of studying are also capable of critical thinking and self-evaluation, and are aware that they can follow their independent path of development. Thus they chose public administration, a course of study that will let them satisfy their scientific passion.

6. Recapitulation

One basic conclusion can be drawn from the student survey: learning and study are important to students. Thus, they are definitely values. They are undeniably instrumental values that serve to arrive at a certain state of affairs, that is, to enter a profession that will let them find an occupation and facilitate starting their own professional career. Students learn and study mainly to have a better future that is measured by *a good job* they were educated for and a remuneration that will let them support their family and help their parents. Learning and study are therefore an instrumental value for the vast majority of the students (95% of respondents). Through these values young people aim to achieve their life-goals. This means that their decisions to take up public administration studies have been well-judged. Learning and study are the means to bring them closer to an intended target. The students are aware of the current situation in the labour market and realise that in the future they will have to start looking for employment. Thus they treat the knowledge and skills they will acquire within a few years of the study as a certain capital that will let them have an optimistic view of that future.

Only a small group (ca. 5% of respondents) consider learning and study as autotelic values, understood as synonymous with personal fulfilment, the way to deepen their passions and scientific interests. These statements were definitely more infrequent which may mean that few students who choose public administration study will be willing to continue

their studies at the second or third level and to see their future related to a scientific career.

This pragmatism of learning and study implies first and foremost their instrumental value which largely dominated their autotelic value.

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