Black Mountain College

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Initially founded by John A. Rice, a scholar with "an ingrained dissatisfaction with the status quo and authority figures"[2], Black Mountain College was conceived in 1933 in the town of Black Mountain, North Carolina in the midst of WWII. Birthed by a desire to create an ideal, forward thinking college whose philosophy was to be based on John Dewey’s principles of progressive education, BMC’s central mission utilized and embraced an unorthodox and interdisciplinary approach to art education in which the very study of art was considered key to any successful liberal arts education. The college’s curriculum stressed the importance of educating the person as a whole while simultaneously emphasizing the role of the arts in association with creative thinking.

- The liberal arts college use of an informal class structure continually encouraged self-expression as well as self-discipline while employing a vast curriculum that included the "visual arts, music, literature, drama, or dance" as well as offering courses on bookbinding, photography, color and design, and woodworking. [1]

- By the time BMC entered the 1940s, its faculty (many of whom were refugees) included artists and scholars such as Willem de Kooning, Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, Paul Goodman, Walter Gropius, and Merce Cunningham.
What was emphasized?

• Students enrolled at BMC were expected to be entirely self-motivated and thus were responsible for their own education. Since there was no enforced class structure (attending class was entirely optional) students had the option to take extended leaves without expulsion and could decide which (if any) tests they wanted to take. And while it seems that faculty simply turned a blind eye to each student's course of action, they noted the choices and subsequent consequences of each student's decision to further their education. However, this approach was considered to encourage a desire to learn for the sake of learning.

• For those who chose to pursue their education with BMC by dedicating themselves fully in the hopes of graduating, "coaching, learning, and mentoring" was made widely available both in and out of the classroom. BMC embraced a continuous learning environment where rather than being limited to a few formal class sessions hoping to meet the needs of the student there existed what were considered to be supplemental activities where students and teachers could continue their conversations.

• These activities included group singing, school dances, general maintenance and construction around the school, and working on the BMC farm [1].

• Students were continually instructed to question everything and to abandon any previous notions of what they held to be true. As such, failing was embraced as it invited an opportunity to learn from the attempt. The attempt, or process, was seen to be far more important than the final product.

• This focus on the growth and expansion of the inner self was reiterated in BMC's Catalogue, stating that "A student usually begins his studies by exploring in the various areas of learning and at the same time he begins to discover his own inclinations, abilities and weaknesses" [4].

Do you believe Black mountain college's relaxed class structure benefitted or hindered students learning?
“Art is revelation instead of information, expression instead of description, creation instead of imitation or repetition. Art is concerned with the HOW, not the WHAT; not with literal content, but with the performance of the factual content. The performance - how it is done - that is the content of art.”

- Josef Albers
Whose philosophy did BMC employ?

- Black Mountain College based their entire philosophy of teaching on John Dewey’s principles of progressive education. Dewey argued that "education and learning are social and interactive processes, and thus the school itself is a social institution through which social reform can and should take place" [3] Dewey held that students are best able to flourish in an environment conducive to interacting and experiencing the lesson plan, further stressing that all students must be taught in a structure that is able to successfully deliver knowledge while remaining considerate of the students interests, needs and experiences.

- Dewey continued to emphasize "the importance of education not only as a place to gain content knowledge, but as a place to learn how to live" [3] as an individual's foundation to achieving their full potential.

- Would you, as a student, be opposed to an instructor tying morality into your lesson plan? Why or why not?
Struggling to survive..

- BMC's initial beginnings were founded in the midst of WWII, seeking to make a name for itself "simultaneously with the rise of Adolf Hitler, the closing of the Bauhaus by the Nazis, and the beginning of the persecution of artists and intellectuals on the European continent"[1].

- Back in the United States, BMC and the American public were grabbing at straws while trying to recover from the Great Depression. Coming into office the same year as BMC's founding, Franklin Roosevelt, who was quite eager to getting people back into work, then established the Public Works Arts Project in 1935 to employ the unemployed (this was inclusive of predominately unemployed, unskilled men) by providing public works jobs, such as road and building construction [5].

- The WPA also employed, though in much smaller numbers, artists, musicians, writers, and actors.

- Struggling to survive, BMC was able to forge past the war years in tact by attaining a second mortgage on the college. However, many of the male students (and even faculty) were either drafted or voluntarily left the college to aid in the war effort.

- Sadly, BMC continued to see financial difficulties, the enrollment rate in turn eventually dwindled and BMC finally closed its doors in 1956.

- Men employed through the WPA were often utilized for jobs requiring rigorous manual labor

- If BMC had come into being after the lingering financial effects of WWII, would it have survived into present day? Why or why not?
The Good, The Bad, and the in-between

- Pro- BMC was a college before its time. It was both "owned and operated by the faculty and was committed to democratic governance"[1] while maintaining that the arts play a key role in both "the experience of learning" as well as development of the self.

- Pro/Con- Students were free to create their own curriculum and attend class as they wished, as individual responsibility was key to the courses taught at BMC. Any potential opportunities for growth and learning were entirely at the student's discretion.

- Pro/Con- Despite BMC seemingly relaxed nature, the liberal arts college utilized intense learning tactics that sought to destroy the students previously held notions and replace them with more forward thinking ideas. Originality was not only expected, it was demanded.

- Con- BMC at glance requires nothing of you, but delving deeper expected nearly everything from you. A complete commitment of your mind and body.

- Con- In order to move up grade levels, students were required to pass extremely difficult written and oral exams. To graduate, a student would undergo an even more rigorous schedule of exams of which would be graded by an outside source who was usually a well known professor from another school specializing in the student's area of expertise. It nearly goes without saying that not very many students graduated from BMC (about 60 total in the school's 24 year run) [2].
My opinion on BMC..

As with any other institution, BMC certainly had its weaker points (fluctuating financial woes eventually leading to its closure/near impossible graduation/having to work on a farm) but in spite of that, I feel as though BMC's utilization of Dewey's principles of progressive education were undoubtedly beneficial. Particularly so when reflecting on the works of artists who were once enrolled, such as de Kooning and Rauschenberg. And though the school chose to forgo a set curriculum and requested you abandon every aspect of your outside life, it weeded out those who enrolled to seek solace in an educational un-structure and left those who devoted themselves with an impressive line of work and a sometimes profound, new outlook on life. The school embraced creativity and pushed students to constant better themselves (during the 30s-50s no doubt!), while simultaneously giving the option for the student to give as much as they saw fit, this (perhaps only my perspective) undoubtedly outweighs the cons.
Works cited


