

A 9. EDUCATION

Everyone needs education by people who already have some, instead of everybody learning only from “the school of hard knocks”. i.e. by their own limited personal experience. Every society starts education within the family, and supplements it with informal education by others (some of which is informed and some providing misinformation, some providing helpful advice and some very bad advice). Peer group pressure in every society at various stages of life is part of the the informal education to which everyone is subjected for better or for worse. In different societies, different social institutions provide additional “education” from which they may gain or society may gain, or both might gain. Our society went from private schooling to a public school system for very good reasons. Some of its problems will be discussed here. All the mass media in effect educate, though perhaps not always intentionally nor always well. Only a few words about these here. To start with their aim is to make money and that means they must interest or entertain people, and the latter motive may often dominate their efforts.

The most devastating critique of some aspects of our public education system is provided in a book by Jonathan Kozol entitled “Savage Inequalities”. He emphasizes the differences even in the physical adequacy of school buildings in affluent and disadvantaged neighborhoods. This results partly from the financing of public schools from property taxes instead of from income taxes levied on larger areas and allocated according to need. The ideal would be to equalize educational establishments nationally by financing them from the national income tax & allocating the funds in relation to the costs of equal provisioning of the system in different states and localities. As long as we have overblown military establishments dominating the use of the federal income tax that is unlikely.

There are somewhat different problems at the K-12 level and at the college level. To start at the beginning, the pre-kindergarden Headstart program has proven itself to be worth far more than the cost, and should be adequately funded & universalized.

Indeed it should be clear that pupils from impoverished & or violent neighborhoods, or from those where parents are for one reason or another not fully helpful to their school children, are the biggest problems in the schools. Schools should not have discipline as their primary problem. The only adequate answer is a more equitable economy in which elimination of poverty takes place to the degree to which that is possible, and a lot of parental help to the schools takes place. That does not mean parental interference but parental help.

It should also be obvious that the schools have some responsibility that goes beyond teaching the “three R’s, reading, ‘riting & “rithmatc” to include other appropriate academic subjects. They inevitably help “socialize” pupils, and teach them how to get along with one another better than they might otherwise, teach them what is desirable as well as required social behavior. It inevitably affects their value system somewhat, and there is no reason why that should not be done consciously & responsibly, although there are limits to how far it should go. Those limits are far short of each teacher’s teaching their own possibly somewhat unique value system.

This also suggests that public schools and private schools, especially religious schools, at the K-12 level inevitably define their tasks somewhat differently. It is quite rational for many people to prefer that their children be given not only religious education they wish for them, but some think that the entire education of their children should be in that framework. But separation by church and state, important as that is for some parents, as past history shows us, then precludes the religious schools from being financed partly or entirely by tax money. There are always ways to get the unique advantages of public schools for their children and in addition give them a religious framework in which to fit and modify it. To be sure, the selectivity of private schools gives their students other advantages per dollar spent on them that public schools cannot attain since they must take everyone applying.

The biggest problems for both public and private schools occur when students reach the age of adolescence. That age group is a problem for all adults dealing with them and for the adolescents themselves as well, with teen sex & pregnancy or not. I have no wisdom to impart on adolescence.

With respect to the academic subjects, one problem lies in the fact that different countries textbooks present quite different accounts of some historical events, distorted by ethnocentrism (simple-minded patriotism). Indeed cultural differences, ethnic and racial differences are also evident in textbooks used by different groups. Indeed whatever groups dominate the ideology of a region or a country are apt to result in textbooks being written accordingly. With increasing globalization, and even before that, this was a troublesome failing. It would be helpful, even if that was to some extent unavoidable, if the textbooks were required to let students know why students in other cultural settings would view things somewhat differently.

Vocational schools, private and public, serve valuable specialized purposes, especially important for those averse to or not suited to book learning. They should always be adequately staffed and often need to provide their students not only first hand experience, but often some opportunities to earn part of their school costs.

Everyone can expect that, when formal education is completed, whatever jobs they get to earn their living will entail much important on the job learning also. There is no way preparation can replace that.

As for college and university education, there is a sharp distinction between general liberal arts education and pre-professional preparation. Many college majors are pre-scientist, pre-engineer, pre-professional or pre something else almost from the beginning. I have no quarrel with pre-anything, except that sometimes it can be so narrowly conceived that students do not get to see it in the broad context they should. They may not see their role as part of the whole social system, see their responsibilities to others, and their dependence on others. Everything in life has its own ethical problems, and the social consequences of ethical and unethical behavior on all parties involved should be part of the context in which what they do or don't do is viewed.

My particular interest has always been in what general liberal arts training college and University students should get whether pre-professional or liberal arts majors. One thing all should get, in addition to things mentioned in the preceding paragraph, is an acquaintance with and hopefully an appreciation of the many ways humans have expressed themselves in the arts throughout history. That can enrich everyone's life tremendously.

Perhaps unique to liberal arts education, however, is the opportunity, for those interested and capable of it, to see individual & social life from a perspective that goes a little beyond that provided by their local & national culture. I know that every one of us is unavoidable a child of the particular time and place and culture in which we grow up and live. We absorb much of what we believe by a sort of intellectual and emotional osmosis process. But a liberal arts education should partially liberate us from unconscious slavery to that. That can enrich our individual lives a little, or tremendously, depending upon us individually, and upon what opportunities we are given or try to get in a liberal arts education program.

It is also true that society depends heavily for its progress upon having enough people with a good liberal arts education in the influential places when needed. Society needs people who can see the human problem in ways others cannot, & hence may be able to exert wiser influences at times.

Countries differ in their higher education in various ways. Obviously they bring students up in the culture of the country. It is perhaps more important now than ever in history that students need everywhere to also learn something about other cultures not just as foreign or hostile or just as different, but as alternative cultures that comparable humans have historically developed in some areas. Cultural differences extend to

differences in their educational systems and methods. All try to teach content and behavior needed in the culture, many offering all teaching as authoritative.

U.S. at the college and University level, not only in liberal arts, presumably try to stimulate minds to be inquisitive rather than just to believe what is taught, to develop some ability to think for themselves, to analyze problems, to ascertain what is relevant, to think logically etc., & to go at least a little outside the mental outlook of their own teachers. Since that involves overcoming some of the things they were taught by parents, peers, or others, it means overcoming whatever emotionally held prejudices they had at one time. This is not natural for humans. For most, it is painful, and so it is resisted. But it is essential for developing the ability to think for oneself rather than merely to defend and rationalize what one thinks one already knows. But this is beneficial for anyone, and is what real human progress depends most upon.

I am most familiar with some problems of the U.S. higher educational system. For one, it has in recent years become too expensive for many students it should serve. This is in part the fault of the faculty greed for money and prestige and of the administrators' greed for prestige for their institution. Each institution competes for status in many fields at the same time, so they try to outbid for faculty that will give them that prestige, field by field in which they try to compete. That provides increased opportunity for faculty to compete for national prestige in a publish or perish contest and to go to the institution that bids higher than their salary where they have been. It is a nice market for research faculty, & research publication outbids teaching for their time. Now some students never get many courses even in their majors taught by full professors, & some are even taught by graduate students (only some of which are better teachers). Some faculty now teach very little & get paid handsomely for research, some of which has little real value but expands their publication record. This game has gone on much too long, and will be difficult to modify.

The only solution I know is for each institution to very strictly limit the fields in which it seeks special prestige, and in each such field all establish comparable pay scales to which they then adhere. Slowly competition could become very limited and gaming and cost escalation end. Students could benefit greatly, and the country would accordingly be better off rather than worse off.