

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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EVERYBODY' S BUSINESS, or REFLECTIONS ON THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION

Part 1 of 2

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by
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- I. *Introduction:* I would like to begin with five autobiographical remarks.
 - A. I am now seventy-six years old
 - B. Without undue immodesty, I think I dare say that I am an educated human being
 - C. To which I must add at once that I have become an educated person only in the last twenty or twenty-five years of my life
 - D. Most of my education has resulted from learning that I have done by myself through reading, or with the help of other adults through discussion—and in both cases through prolonged reflection and hard-thinking about the enlarged experience of my mature years
 - E. I have long since forgotten most of the things I learned in school, retaining only the skills I acquired there—the skills of reading and writing, of talking and listening—and the ideas or insights that increased any understanding.
- II. From my own experience in becoming educated, the most important thing that I have learned about education is that it is a life-long process in which schools and teachers play only a part and a relatively small part at that.
 - A. *The role of schools* (and here I mean all undergraduate schooling from kindergarten up to the Bachelor of Arts degree)
 1. To provide the basic, common, and general training that all the young need for their futures in our technologically advanced, industrialized, democratic society

- a. Preparation for the discharge of the two common obligations of all
 - (1) The political obligation of citizenship—the highest public office in a democratic republic, for the citizens are the ruling class, the principal rulers. The officials of government are their servants, the instrumental rulers.
 - (2) The moral obligation to lead decent human lives—to make a good life for one’s self, in which the pursuits of leisure, all of which involve learning, are the highest forms of human activity.
 - b. In addition to this preparation for adult life that basic, common, general undergraduate schooling should provide *for all*, it should also provide—*but only for some*—preparation for graduate, advanced, professional, technical, or specialized schooling.
2. When the role of undergraduate schooling is thus understood, it will also be understood that undergraduate schooling should be completely non-specialized and completely non-vocational.
- a. All specialization and all specialized training for particular vocations should come after common, general schooling is completed—either, in graduate or advanced schooling, or not in any school at all, but on the job.
 - b. The distinction between general and specialized schooling is simply the distinction between what is everybody’s business and what is not everybody’s business, but only the business of this or that individual or this or that group of individuals.
 - c. What is everybody’s business consists in the generalist’s approach to all subject-matters—to everything that can be learned.
 - d. In contrast, what is not everybody’s business is the approach made by particular specialists to limited areas of subject-matter, whether these limited areas are called “humanities” or “sciences.”
 - (1) Specialized scholarship in non-scientific areas, currently called the humanities, is just as specialized as specialized research in the areas of subject-matter called the sciences.

- (2) Neither the humanities nor the sciences as they are currently approached—studied or taught by specialists—are everybody’s business.
- (3) All subject-matters—mathematics and the sciences, as well as literature, history, and philosophy—are everybody’s business when they are approached—studied or taught—by generalists.

B. *The role of teachers*

- 1. Teachers at best—and they are seldom at their best—are only instrumental aids to learning, not the primary agents of learning.
 - a. This means that they, like schools, are dispensable. One can become educated without either going to school or having teachers.
 - b. But while dispensable, absolutely speaking, they are also practically useful. They help to make the process of becoming educated easier; they facilitate it; they increase the likelihood of its happening; they help to make it more effective and more successful.

Digression: The Socratic view of the teacher as midwife.

It is the mother who labors to give birth,
not the midwife.

- 2. To understand this, it is necessary to understand the distinction between learning by instruction and learning by discovery.
 - a. The incorrect way of understanding this distinction:
 - (1) By *instruction*: learning in which the teacher is the primary agent
 - (2) By *discovery*: learning without teachers, in which the learner is the primary agent
 - b. The correction of this misunderstanding of the distinction.
 - (1) The two kinds of learning are both learning by discovery, in which thinking on the part of the learner is the primary or principal cause of the learning

- (2) But one kind of learning by discovery is aided by teachers as secondary or instrumental causes of learning; and the other is unaided by teachers
 - in. short, all learning is by discovery; it is either *aided* or *unaided* discovery
 - (3) And in all learning, the teacher is only a help, not the primary cause.
- c. To understand this one must look more deeply into learning itself.
- (1) All learning that can be done in school consists in an improvement of the mind.
 - (2) The mind can be improved in three ways:
 - (a) By the acquisition of information and of organized knowledge
 - (If the acquisition is only by parrotlike verbal memory, as it is in most cases, then it is not genuine learning at all, and most of it will be forgotten.)
 - (b) By the acquisition of the skills of learning itself, as well as other skills
 - (c) By an increase in the mind's understanding of what it has experienced, what it knows, and even of its own skills
 - (3) Just as there are three ways in which the mind can grow or be improved, so there are three ways in which so-called teachers can help the mind to grow
 - (a) The teacher who merely supervises and tests the process of acquiring information or units or organized knowledge.
 - This is the lowest and most dispensable function that so-called teachers can perform,, Teaching-machines and computer consoles can probably do this better and will, someday completely replace human beings in the performance of this function.
 - (b) The teacher who supervises the acquirement of a skill; in other words, the teacher as a coach, for it is the same kind of

function that is performed by someone who helps us to acquire skill in reading and writing as that performed by the tennis or swimming coach or the piano or violin coach.

Coaching is a higher function, and will probably never be performed by machines or computers.

But most of those who, in our schools, are called teachers, do very little coaching, if any at all, except in the physical education department or on the playing fields.

- (c) The teacher who, like Socrates, performs the midwifery function of helping the mind increase its understanding by dealing with the fundamental ideas that govern all fields of subject-matter and are involved in our thinking about them.

This function is the teaching function par excellence.

There are even fewer who perform this function than those who perform the function of coaching that helps us to acquire the skills of learning.

III. With this understanding of the limited role of schools and teachers, we can understand the preparatory function they perform in the whole process of becoming educated after all schooling is completed.

- A. Here it is necessary to understand the distinction between the mature and the immature.
1. Immaturity—lack of experience and seriousness of purpose with a view to one's life as a whole—is not only the greatest, but also an insuperable, obstacle to becoming educated.
 2. It is impossible for the schools to produce educated human beings, for the immaturity of those in school—an immaturity that persists as long as they remain in school—makes it impossible for them to become learned—to become human beings with understanding and wisdom.
- B. That being the case, schooling and teaching are both misdirected if they aim at producing *educated* human beings.

Their aim should be to produce *educable* human beings by preparing them for the life-long process of learning through which they can become educated human beings at the end of their lives.

1. It should try to make the young competent as learners, not sufficiently learned so that no further learning is needed.
 2. It should try to attract the young to the life of learning by giving them some vision of what can be learned if they continue the process of learning long after all schooling is completed.
- C. When it is properly directed by these two aims, instead of being misdirected by the illusory aim of trying to turn out learned or educated young people, with their education completed, basic undergraduate schooling should have three fundamental objectives, as follows:
1. The *inculcation of discipline in the liberal arts*—the arts of learning—the skills of reading and writing, of speaking and listening; of observing, measuring, and calculating.
 2. A strong and persistent invitation—a well-formed disposition or inclination—to go on with learning for a lifetime after all formal schooling is completed, for without that all, schooling is a complete waste except for some minor, practical purpose, such. as earning a living.
 3. And, finally, the aim should be to give the young a general and hence a superficial acquaintance with the whole world of learning—with every field of learning approached as the generalist should approach it, in *terms of the controlling ideas and principles that govern particular disciplines*.



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