

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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*Philosophy is Everybody's Business*

Nº 805

*I have a son who goes to SMU. He could've gone to UCLA here in California, but it's one more letter he'd have to remember.*

—Shecky Greene



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## GENERAL EDUCATION VS. VOCATIONAL TRAINING

Dear Dr. Adler,

There is a continual argument about which is the best type of education—a “general” education in cultural subjects or a “specialized” education in one particular field or occupation. Are both types of education necessary? Or is a general education good for some people, and a vocational education for other people? What are the nature and aims of education?

Robert C. Morgan

In the opinion of the ancients, education is the process of developing or perfecting human beings. It tries to cultivate the humanity of man by developing his specifically human excellences—both intellectual and moral. The ultimate goals of education are human happiness and the welfare of society. Its products are good men and good citizens.

If the ancients were asked whether education should be specialized, they would answer that it should be specialized only in that it should be conceived in terms of man's specifically human nature. If they were asked whether it should be vocational, they would say that the only vocation with which it should be concerned is the common human calling—the pursuit of happiness. What we call specialized and vocational training—training for particular jobs—they would regard as the training of slaves, not the education of free men.

This classical view of education has prevailed right down to our own century. It is reaffirmed as late as 1916 by none other than John Dewey. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey declares that merely vocational training is the training of animals or slaves. It fits them to become cogs in the industrial machine. Free men need liberal education to prepare them to make a good use of their freedom.

Writing in 1776, at the beginning of the industrial revolution, the English economist Adam Smith advocates a minimum general education for all citizens. He points out that a man who is incapable of using his intellectual faculties properly is not fully human. He describes the stultification of the worker from whom no real craftsmanship or skill is demanded. The division of labor, which limits him to performing a few simple operations, makes him a mere appendage of the industrial process.


As a result, the worker, according to Adam Smith, “becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human being to become. The torpor of his mind renders him not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any moral judgment concerning many of the ordinary duties of private life.”

Adam Smith's picture may be unduly grim, and more applicable to the eighteenth than to the twentieth century. But the essential truth

it points out remains unchanged. Specialized vocational training which does no more than fit a man for a limited task in the industrial process is as stultifying as the job itself. Such training is, strictly speaking, not education in the human sense at all. It contributes to the production of material goods, not to the development of human beings.

While the ancients had the correct view of education as essentially liberal, they did not think that all men should be liberally educated, because they did not think that all men are fitted by nature for the pursuit of happiness or citizenship or the liberal pursuits of leisure. But we today, at least those of us who are devoted to the principles of democracy, think otherwise. We maintain that all men should be citizens, that all have an equal right to the pursuit of happiness, and that all should be able to enjoy the goods of civilization. Hence we think that a democratic society must provide liberal schooling for all.

Vocational training for particular tasks in the industrial process should be done by industry itself and on the job, not by the schools or in classrooms. The curriculum of basic schooling, from the first grade through college, should be wholly liberal and essentially the same for all. In view of the wide range of abilities and aptitudes with which the schools have to deal, that curriculum must be adapted to different children in different ways.

In other words, we must solve the problem of how to give all the children—the least gifted as well as the most gifted—the same kind of liberal education that was given in the past only to the few. Upon our success in solving that problem the future of democracy depends. 

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## THE ART OF TEACHING

Dear Dr. Adler,

We all remember teachers who have had a great effect on us in school or in college. But we find it hard to put our finger on just what it is that they transmitted to us and how they did it. All the talk on education today does not seem to shed any light on the art of teaching. What is it that goes on in the relation between teacher and student? What does the teacher do, and what happens to the student?

William Greene

Socrates gives us a basic insight into the nature of teaching when he compares the art of teaching to the ancient craft of the midwife. Just as the midwife assists the body to give birth to new life, so the teacher assists the mind to deliver itself of ideas, knowledge, and understanding. The essential notion here is that teaching is a humble, helping art. The teacher does not produce knowledge or stuff ideas into an empty, passive mind. It is the learner, not the teacher, who is the active producer of knowledge and ideas.

The ancients distinguish the skills of the physician and the farmer from those of the shoemaker and the house builder. Aristotle calls medicine and agriculture cooperative arts, because they work with nature to achieve results that nature is able to produce by itself. Shoes and houses would not exist unless men produced them; but the living body attains health without the intervention of doctors, and plants and animals grow without the aid of farmers. The skilled physician or farmer simply makes health or growth more certain and regular.


Teaching, like farming and healing, is a cooperative art which helps nature do what it can do itself—though not as well without it. We have all learned many things without the aid of a teacher. Some exceptional individuals have acquired wide learning and deep insight with very little formal schooling. But for most of us the process of learning is made more certain and less painful when we have a teacher's help. His methodical guidance makes our learning—and it is still ours—easier and more effective.

One basic aspect of teaching is not found in the other two cooperative arts that work with organic nature. Teaching always involves a relation between the mind of one person and the mind of another. The teacher is not merely a talking book, an animated phonograph record, broadcast to an unknown audience. He enters into a dialogue with his student. This dialogue goes far beyond mere “talk,” for a good deal of what is taught is transmitted almost unconsciously in the personal interchange between teacher and student. We might get by with encyclopaedias, phonograph records, and TV broadcasts if it were not for this intangible element, which is present in every good teacher-student relation.

This is a two-way relation. The teacher gives, and the student receives aid and guidance. The student is a “disciple”; that is, he accepts and follows the discipline prescribed by the teacher for the development of his mind. This is not a passive submission to arbi-

trary authority. It is an active appropriation by the student of the directions indicated by the teacher. The good student uses his teacher just as a child uses his parents, as a means of attaining maturity and independence. The recalcitrant student, who spurns a teacher's help, is wasteful and self-destructive.

Speaking simply and in the broadest sense, the teacher shows the student how to discern, evaluate, judge, and recognize the truth. He does not impose a fixed content of ideas and doctrines that the student must learn by rote. He teaches the student how to learn and think for himself. He encourages rather than suppresses a critical and intelligent response.

The student's response and growth is the only reward suitable for such a labor of love. Teaching, the highest of the ministerial or cooperative arts, is devoted to the good of others. It is an act of supreme generosity. St. Augustine calls it the greatest act of charity. 

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

I enjoy your Great Ideas Online very, very much. It's a relief to hear some sanity in the midst of all the insanity in this great District of Columbia these days!

Thanks again.

Linda Aber

*We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.*

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