

Problems in Education Today

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Education is something that has been almost completely redefined within the past ten years or so for both the academic and the general public. There was once a time when in order to be educated, one had to bring ones self to the very notion of 'being educated', and in order to do this, one had to search it out. Education was once something that was hidden behind secret walls and hieroglyphics, a mystery to the masses and a secret treasury and hideout for the privileged. It sounds as if I'm speaking about the Victorian ages, when kids would climb chimneys and thinkers would gather in a specified section of a library or tavern, but no, it was only ten-twenty years ago! How can a thing such as this be explained? 'To be educated' is no longer seen as an alternative path, but is now the mainstream. At what gain and at what loss has such a change come to?

Will things ever go back to the way they were, or is it the case that education is destined to be swamped with students, teachers, league-tables and the lark? Will Oxford continue to reject ever longer lists of straight 'A' students? Will business studies and psychology continue to be jam-packed with money-loving learners? Will education's link to career, to money, to profit, to what I call 'meaningless education', continue to be heightened, reinforced, promoted and based upon the general and foremost assumption that 'education = personal success', rather than what I would say it should mean which is 'education = the undying lust to *be* educated'? How far can we go until society begins to hate education for all its pretensions, shallowness and the idea of 'being educated' as much as students hate the idea of working all evenings at McDonalds whilst their student debts are growing ever larger? For education and the educated these are very frightening times, and what I think is more frightening than the amount of soulless and robotic mannerisms of student struggles, financially and supportively, is the fact that both mankind's affirmed and assumed definitions of education is rapidly changing before our very eyes. Privatisation of schools, over-testing, student stress, unhealthy catering, debt, career, one's future: all of these and many more are now commonly known and used phrases within educational topics, and whilst some people would accept this as simply 'the way things are going', there are others of us who would feel a little nausea in

our stomachs each time these words and phrases are used, especially those who take the concept of 'being educated' as a deeply personal one of great value and importance.

What have been some of the consequences of all this? That special section of the library and that special tavern where all the thinkers used to gather has most certainly vanished, or else become harder to find, more elite, more secretive, more protective. If I knew of such a place I would be sure to tell no one about it unless I was certain that they ought to. But perhaps more importantly, those that are able to see beyond the shallow flamboyancy and firework displays of 'education = personal success' are pushed ever further back into a shadow. Oh, where have their identities gone? There was once a time when a truly 'educated' person stood out like a sore thumb, especially if he/she were a graduate from a working class background. More importantly, even if they *didn't* stand out like a sore thumb, they at least *felt* as if they did.

Recently an advert was on the television promoting a certain university with the general message that was 'discover the real person inside you trying to break free'. You may know it yourself; it's the one where some guy has some hands trying to burst out from underneath his skin on his chest, the hands being the icon of 'the *real him*' (an advert which I think would very much scare little children. It reminded me of the 'Alien' films – rated 18). Anyhow, you can imagine how angry that made me. 'Great!' I thought to myself. 'So what I once considered to be my own personal privilege, my own personal gift, even my own personal right perhaps, is now being advertised! – Advertised to be swamped, consumed, used up, swallowed whole and turned into the common dreams of successful careers, large houses, posh cars and trophy wives, dreams that everyone can have but obviously, only very few can get!'

'The right to be educated'; what does that mean? To the common man it means exactly that, a right which each and everyone ought to enforce, a right they have over anyone no matter how rich, clever or well represented. What I would urge people to consider is not to politically or literally enforce a statement I shall give, but to be as aware of it within our modern society as they are of the statement 'education = personal success' and that is this: 'one has to *earn* the right to be educated'. But can anyone promise that a statement like that shall one day become common place? And if it were to become common place, how will people then go about 'earning that right'? More realistically speaking, in the face of how 'a degree will get you a good job and fulfil all your dreams', who on earth is ever going to care about *earning the right to an education* and take something so baseless, so unpractical, so silly even as

something serious? – I shall tell you who shall care about it; it is only the people who believe they have in fact *earned* it.

It's easy for people to shout out here and there what their rights are, it's easy to claim when someone has been discriminated against due to their sex, race and abilities/disabilities, yet when someone feels they have earned something which very few others earned, how can he or she shout about that? Would he or she even *want* to shout about it? I wouldn't, simply because it isn't actually anything you *can* shout about. One person cannot tell a hundred other people that their presence is displeasing and thus he/she takes it upon his/herself to do something about it. That's just being anti-social, that's being impractically awkward and that's just being a nuisance. So to raise the question again, what does 'the right to be educated' mean for these people that feel they must suffer in silence on top of debt, stress, privatisation and all the other growing factors of severe hardship and vulgarities in education? The 'right to be educated' is without doubt founded upon some law based upon some kind of anti-discrimination act. As a result education has turned into something which transforms students into working cogs of capital, which in the eyes of those that value education, our modern, flashy, trendy and future-embracing education system simply *isn't* education. What about *our* rights?

Hush, hush now, let us not all shout and preach of our so-called rights. Boasting about them would be the last thing I would want to do. Yet what the problem here is I think is the actual grounds upon which these rights are based. It is clear to me that everyone in fact *cannot* have a right to an education; in as far as each person shall define the word and, most importantly, its most immediate uses. I would propose that it is impossible. Economically and statistically, the direction in which our current education system is going is fairer. It turns all our future workers into skilled, computer-literate, multi-lingual, well-written, well-spoken, well-mannered folk, which will be very economically rewarding. The advances that are being made via disability access in schools and anti-discrimination policies are very rewarding in terms of exercising equal opportunity and statistically, we are generally bringing many more numbers into the learning circles, particularly in higher education. Yet surely, the purpose and true value of education ought not to lie predominantly and wholeheartedly within these issues. Since when did the true value, meaning and charm of education lie within economic growth and educating people merely for the sake of exercising their rights? However, there is little to nothing that I can prove unless I define what I mean by *earning the right to an education*. A person usually goes to Oxford or Cambridge by achieving perfect grades and with average grades a person gets a mediocre university packed full of

people and no special, individual attention. Many people would say that getting good grades does not prove you are a clever person and the same goes for low grades and low intelligence, but what I believe is important to understand is what is *required* of a person to get these high grades.

From my own experiences of education, it doesn't take brains to earn grades, as having brains is merely a useful bonus. What is most important I believe is the person's character; or rather, how flexible, easily-moulded, easily-crafted, shape-shifting, surface-pleasing and substance-abandoning a person's character is. What is then required is a lot of dedication and basically a lot of work. Individual style, clever tweaks, sly moves, random outbursts, mere hints of references, signs of inner confrontation and disagreement and minds unmade, clues indicating a person that is growing and learning rather than having grown and learnt and in many ways general creativity seems to me to be a thing of the past. Yet I do not feel as though examinations and coursework should be abolished altogether because I believe that they *can* be done so that grades are accurate in regards to a person's intelligence, but our education system marks papers in accordance to how much a person knows, how clearly they get that knowledge across and more or less how much they have stuck to everything told to them in class.

Quantity of knowledge, clarity of knowledge, organisation of knowledge, selectivity and appropriation of knowledge and formality of knowledge is what students are being marked on by today's examiners. For most people, this system works perfectly, and of course it'll work perfectly for our economy. Yet there are those of us, or perhaps it's just me, that feel there is something deeply and tragically wrong with this and who feel as though they are not being tested in areas where they ought to be tested. They are not being tested for example, on how evident it is that they have taken what they have learnt to heart and how much they have grown as people from what they have learnt and how they may be likely to take what they have learnt and recreate it all in their own fashion, to make their own system of ideas, imaginings and ponderings. They are not being tested for example, not just on how much they have taken in from what they've learnt, but also on how much they are capable of giving something back to that very same subject from which they learnt.

As an article written by Geraldine Hackett and Sian Griffiths (2006) in *The Sunday Times* suggests, I'm not the only one who thinks that individual and original students are being hard done by as they say that 'schools complain that candidates who display originality are

being let down by inflexible marking schemes and poorly qualified examiners'. John Bald, an education consultant, comments (in Hackett and Griffiths, 2006): "Boards are trying to get a grip on the expansion in numbers getting top grades by using rigid mark systems that do not take account of exceptional intellectual ability". The numbers of papers being sent back to examiners for re-marking has increased by 20% in the past two years. I was one of those students myself as in getting a D in my Philosophy A-Level my teacher said that in my synopsis the examiner probably did not understand my clever use of Nietzsche's views on ethics in a question about Sartre's standing on moral responsibility. My synopsis didn't go any higher on a re-grade, yet according to this newspaper article, grades have been known to go 'from Unclassified to a B', due to a huge display of originality.

So what is the result of all this? Are top universities being pumped full of megabyte-high-capacity automatons? If the growing numbers of A-grade students is a problem, as John Bald suggests (in Hackett and Griffiths, 2006), why do examiners not do what I think is the most justifiable and sensible thing and mark even more strictly upon 'automated' and routine answers and be far more lenient with original ones; that way we get people that deserve a place in Oxford into Oxford don't we? The reason why examiners will not mark this way is because it is obviously too dangerous. It would mean that they would have to actually *engage* with what is being written and with the potential of the person *behind what is written* rather than look at what is written through special 2D goggles; goggles that are exam board friendly, goggles that place no personal responsibility upon the examiners as it essentially *isn't them* that is marking it. Plus it would mean that students would realize that originality does get you higher marks... hang on, that's a good thing isn't it! It would also probably mean that less people would even be interested in going to university as it would again become a place for intellectuals rather than business men and women with aspirations of well paid careers.

And it is not just original students that feel they must suffer as pressure is put on to them to in fact be 'less original'. There are many teachers, who were once students themselves living in an education system which was once far more free and open for individual thinkers, who are now tired of meetings where they have to take notice of top managements, inspectors and government curriculum guidelines. My philosophy teacher was one of those teachers who were critical of the ways in which she was being forced to teach. There are teachers out there that feel the desperate urge to actually *teach*.

What does the word 'teach' mean? – for without doubt, the word 'teacher' has also been hugely redefined. The most instant definition of it is for one person to inform another person/s about something he/she knows that they do not. Yet on a level of more gravity I believe 'teaching' also contains the disposition of a person informing another from a first-person perspective. To teach someone something means to say 'this is what / have learnt'. This does not mean to say that teachers ought to ram their opinions down the throats of students. Yet teachers themselves are being forced to also become automated input, output devices, and it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to break out of this hardening shell.

Teachers are more accurately defined as 'messengers' in today's education system I believe. They pass a message from a 'blackboard of knowledge' onto the students and are only teachers in as far as students respond to their messages with individual questions, that is if it is a question that the 'board of knowledge' would validate as unoriginal enough to answer. In short, 'to teach' once meant to teach from a first-person perspective and today it means to teach from a third-person perspective, meaning that the individual behind the 'shadow of a teacher' becomes ever more enraged at their own passivity and students feel an ever-increasing feeling of being alienated from the *knowledgeable* and perhaps *wise authoritarian* that teachers are traditionally taken for.

It is one thing to say that original students and teachers are severely suffering, yet now is a good time to raise perhaps an even bigger problem. Let us say that a modern day Ludwig Wittgenstein, Einstein, Karl Marx or Beethoven walks into our education circles today ... imagine the difficulties that such a person shall encounter and as a result of this, how much future thinkers, systems of thought, economic theory and practice, ethical, political and artistic practice shall all be set back another fifty years or so, or else would have missed out on crucial or even critical moments of human development.

So, upon looking at great thinkers and artists in the past who we all greatly value with insurmountable gratitude in today's economy and culture, those very same kinds of people in the eyes of mankind a hundred years from now are very much under threat due to the difficulties they face in our soul-crunching education system which sees its students only as future components of capital rather than potential radicals, alternative leaders, inventive hermits, new lights in the arts or potential geniuses.

Can anyone, no matter what background they are from, what their interests are, what their situation in life is or even what their disposition is, afford to take such a risk as to loose these crucial leaders in our future merely for the sake of churning out half-human half-robot/alien workers for the sake of big business? In these uncertain times where technological development is racing ahead of us and ethical, political and religious practice has to evolve at a pace never before seen on earth, can we really afford to make such a mistake?

Perhaps what I believe our educational system ought to be has become like God's Kingdom, living on mars and global equality: suited only for dreamers. But in the words of John Lennon, I'm sure '*I'm not the only one*'. And as for the individual tweak, will things change? – '*You suffer, you cry, you labour, you die, things will change, time will tell*' (Barbara Gaskin sings, in the band *Spirogyra*).

References

Hackett, G. & Griffiths, S. (2006) Examiners punish 'too smart' A-level pupils, *The Sunday Times*, p.1.6.

Victor Rikowski recently started as a Music & Philosophy undergraduate at Roehampton University, London. He currently works part-time as a library assistant for the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea in London. This last year he has worked as a caterer at *The Golden Fleece*, a family pub in east London, and also had a temporary contract with TFPL which involved working as a records assistant at Lawrence Graham (Solicitors). Victor also produced a PowerPoint presentation for a keynote speech on human rights by Dr Michael Neary (University of Warwick) at Roehampton University in June 2006. Previous to that, Victor studied at Havering Sixth-Form College (2003-2005). His first article was published in January 2000, when he was 11 years old, in *The Wanstead and Woodford Guardian*. It was about his hopes and fears for the new millennium, and was entitled: *What will the future hold for us?* His article, *Future of Global Capitalism: Millionaires Ruling the Millions* was published in *Information for Social Change* No.14 (Winter 2000), and his poem *Perfect Sound* was published in *Information for Social Change* No.9 (Winter 2003). Victor has designed a number of covers for journals and books (including the cover for ISC No.14), and designed the logo for the Rikowski web site, The Flow of Ideas, entitled *The Ideas Sprites*. From 2000-2004, Victor was a member of the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, Junior and Senior Youth Drama Groups. He has also written a philosophical manuscript entitled, *The Quest for Perfect Sound: Beyond the Free Spirit*. He is currently working on a PowerPoint cartoon story, *The Ockress*. Victor is 19 years old, and lives in London. You can find out more about Victor at the 'About Us' section of The Flow of Ideas web site: <http://www.flowideas.co.uk>

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