

Finding The Purpose of Education II

Recently, I read a book on writing fiction just after watching curriculum discussions on an email list. As I read the author's opinion on plotting, I made a connection to curriculum and to "education" in general: "You can package plot any number of ways, and the way you package it decides what number [of plots] you'll end up with. There is no magic number, one or one million. ... any enterprising person can find more, or find another way to package the concept and come out with a different number."

That's what I've been seeing on those email lists, I thought, a million ways of packaging.

No matter where we go, "education" is on people's minds. You can't get away from it. New homeschooling parents work to find the "best" program, while veteran homeschooling parents assemble next year's schedule. Seriously-independent homeschooling parents keep a weather eye on government plans for "core" standards, while newspaper reporters and columnists write about test scores and their meaning, and the mystery of mastery. We hear about meeting benchmarks, raising bars, and holding students and teachers accountable as politicians make their fingers wag.

But, in all those educational haystacks where is the needle we all worry about? In my light-bulb moment while reading about plot, I scribbled a list of what I think "education" means in relation to teaching children.

- How to manage communication -- reading, writing and speaking
- How to manage numbers
- Our story
- Our arts
- How everything works
- How to get along with people
- How to think clearly about it all

I think that, worldwide, education outlines include these points, although each region has its own method.

The French start early, with children often enrolled in a crèche when they're two. The Finnish delay formal schooling until seven. Americans centralize 'everything child' in schools. Germans restrict schooling to academic subjects while community clubs in towns handle sports and hobbies. Montessori schools specialize in hands-on learning. Many 'regular' schools prefer texts.

After I wrote my list, I wanted to test it against the ideas of teachers and professors, so I turned to the Internet. I presumed that some professors at colleges and universities would have a syllabus with the basics: 'this is what we need to teach the children.' What I found, though, was if people did produce education-lists, that search engines have a hard time finding them. In terms of practicality, the search results were junk:

The Brookings Institute ¹

(fewer wars, better health and greater wealth)

Safer

Healthier

Wealthier

Nebraska State Education Association ²

(concerning importance of public schools)

cornerstone of democracy

reduces costs to taxpayers (welfare, prisons, intervention services)

only schools that must meet needs of all students

foster interactions among diverse subgroups

best provision for old age

95% of jobs require high school education

nation pays a price for poorly educated workers

cost of dropouts affects us all

children are our nation's future

worthy investment of public funds

NEA vice president ³

Give them the knowledge and skills and attitudes that will make them successful in their careers, in their personal lives and in their lives as participating members of society.

An article on textbooks and the effect of the opinions of the Texas State Board of Education ⁴:

In fact most of these books fall far short of their important role in the educational scheme of things. They are processed into existence using the pulp of what already exists, rising like swamp things from the compost of the past. The mulch is turned and tended by many layers of editors who scrub it of anything possibly objectionable before it is fed into a government-run "adoption" system that provides mediocre material to students of all ages.

This lack of certainty about what education 'is,' and how to provide it, seemed to underscore the homeschooling view that, in education, there is no one right way.

Still, I continued to look. I adjusted my search terms from a general "purpose of education" to a sharper "purpose of curriculum." Not sharp enough. I appropriated words at linked websites to narrow my search farther. Still, I did not find easily understood education to-do lists. I thought I missed something obvious, so I clicked on Google Scholar to see what academics say. Not much. [see PDF of first page of Google Scholar results ⁶]

Not even the "Common Core Standards" ⁵ showing the concerns of state governors present a clear outline of what we feel is important in the education of our children.

- *Aligned with college and work expectations;*
- *Clear, understandable and consistent;*
- *Include rigorous content and application of knowledge through high-order skills;*
- *Build upon strengths and lessons of current state standards;*
- *Informed by other top performing countries, so that all students are prepared to succeed in our global economy and society;*
- *and Evidence-based.*

Despite the universal human compulsion to educate children, I found no outline of learning (which does not mean none exist, only that I did not find any).

Despite decades of compulsory education, I found no simple explanation of the objective, other than scoring well in competition with others.

Despite 'everyone' knowing that 'education' is necessary, no one seems to have written down the basics, simply and without bureaucratic rules.

Harking back to the writing book that sent me down this rabbit hole, we, and our education establishment, have no theme statement, no topic sentence, no premise. Using the jargon of our half-trillion dollar⁷ schooling industry's example, we have no mission statement. This lack is an elephant sitting in the corner of our cultural schoolroom. The elephant wears a dunce cap.

Despite the elephantish lack of a simple purpose of education, peoples around the world have schooling plans. The educators who tend to everyone from infants to grandparents (preschool to adult ed) are fascinated with filling up our minutes, hours and days. People thus fascinated have constructed curriculums, possibly because of:

- a job (teacher needs plan for the year)
- a requirement (committee to develop a program)
- money (a program for a well-funded market)
- service (a desire to help)
- desperate (took on the job; existing materials are unsatisfactory; must keep on with the job)

We spend so much time and money on 'education' and still, I have not seen any short specific opinions about what adults in children's lives need to teach them. What does Kayla Wilson need to know? Or Jaden Ledbetter? Or Ursula Hohmeier? Or Paolo Maldonado? Or Mireille Francoeur? Or Asad Nasser? Or Kim Hee Eun?

For homeschooling parents, the choice among programs comes down to what works best within a family. As with fiction writing, fitting specifics into a child's education "is a slippery thing and no one can hold onto it for long."

A parent could do worse than to help a child learn ...

- to communicate
- how to work with numbers
- the basics of the stories of Earth and the Life inhabiting it
- to appreciate beauty
- to understand how things work
- to get along with people unless it is necessary not to
- and to sort out wisdom from nonsense.

Notes:

1. "Three Reasons the Americans Should Support Global Education," Rebecca Winthrop, 23 Sep 2009, The Brookings Institute
http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2009/0923_education_obama_winthrop.aspx
2. "Top 10 Reasons to Support Public Education," Illinois Coalition for Public Education, June 1994, Nebraska State Education Association
<http://www.nsea.org/parents/articles/top10.htm>
3. "Did You Do It On Purpose?," Lily Eskelsen, 12 Jan 2010, Lily's Blackboard blog
<http://lilysblackboard.org/2010/01/did-you-do-it-on-purpose/>
4. "The Texas School Book Repository," Roger Ebert, 1 Apr 2010, Chicago Sun-Times
http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2010/04/the_texas_school_book_reposito.html
5. Common Core Standards, National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers
<http://www.corestandards.org/>
6. Google Scholar results for Apr. '10 query
<http://militaryhomeschooling.files.wordpress.com/2010/04/2010-03-mar-31-1st-page-google-scholar-results-for-purpose.pdf>
7. "Remarks by Secretary Paige at the Executive Leaders Forum, Committee of 100, San Francisco Chamber of Commerce," 28 Jun 2004, U.S. Department of Education
"It's time we recognized a central, cardinal fact: education is a big business. It is a huge part of our economy, a large segment of our gross national product. Last year, as a nation, we spent more than half a trillion dollars on K-12 education. This was on the local, state and federal levels. Our nation's educational efforts are a large financial endeavor—rivaling spending on the defense, agriculture, transportation, telecommunications or entertainment sectors. It is time we used a little business sense to straighten out our schools."
<http://www2.ed.gov/news/speeches/2004/06/06282004.html>