

On Being Taught to Learn

There is no teacher who can teach a student all that there is to know. Yes, this is true because there will always be more information to learn, but more importantly, no mentor can ever teach a student everything he/she will know because no two people can know in the same way. In Asimov's "Reason," Powell explains: "You can prove anything you want by coldly logical reason—if you pick the proper postulates." We all have our preconceptions about the world and our filters through which we read that world. If we cannot be taught what we are to know, but it is agreed that we should all attempt to understand the world in the same way, then it stands to reason that the core purpose of education is to teach students to better understand ourselves, our convictions, so that we may acknowledge and apply these as we observe the world—we must learn how to read the world.

University is an interesting entity in this way because, particularly to a student of aerospace engineering, it seems clearly regimented in its curriculum: to develop an elemental understanding of the objectives and mechanics that characterize work in the aerospace industry. This begs a question, however: how does university foster this understanding, and is this understanding the most valuable takeaway from university? The surface content of university curricula consists of teaching and then testing course material that addresses some type of problem, be it calculus or physics or computer science. But, stepping back to the macro scale, it becomes clearer and clearer that what university teaches is not the course material (quizzing any student on a class they took more than six months ago makes this point clear), but how to learn.

From kindergarten through higher education, students are taught to learn. We typically are taught to learn via the medium of content that will hopefully, in some way or another, be relevant to our lives, but the mark of a successful student is being able to learn. This becomes even more evident when considering how the traditional classroom evolves with time for a student. A kindergarten class is nothing like a university course because the university course assumes a greater ability on the part of the student to be able to process information than the kindergarten class does. This progression is the entire premise of our educational institution: to incrementally construct students who can contribute to society by teaching them how to learn about the world. We put ourselves in situations which force us to be able to learn to information and then cross-reference against how others learned it. In doing so, we gain a better understanding of ourselves, which in turns allows us to learn better in the future.

Of course, this speaks nothing to the realities of inadequacies in our current educational environment, be they financial or methodological, but I argue that learning to learn is the crux of any education in some way or another. When I leave university, I don't expect to know everything that I will need to know to enter whatever field I find my way into, but I expect to be able to understand my postulates and my filters such that I may read the world I face—such that I may learn.