Why does Montaigne emphasise pleasure and happiness when he talks about education?

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Montaigne's best and most popular works are his set of *Essais*. Written in the 1950s, they remain influential today. In the first volume, chapter twenty-six, "*De l'Institution des Enfants*" (in English "*On the Education of Children*"), he talks of education, in particular of schools, and how education both helps and hinders the instilling of behaviours, wisdom and knowledge into our children.

Happiness is of course a very crucial part of education and the process of educating, because without happiness and some desire to repeat the learning experience, children, or anyone, will not learn. The same applies the other way around: education leads to happiness because of behaviours learnt and knowledge gained (Michalos, 2007).

Montaigne's foray into writing about education stems from his own experience, as do most writings, especially those of philosophers. He states that he "never seriously settled [him]self into the reading of any book [...] little or nothing stays with [him]". His introspective wisdom as a source is a common pattern even recently (Ediger, 1997), showing that his literature and his experiences, although definitely not on the reading lists of most young people due to their at first seemingly impenetrable vocabulary, are relevant and he is to be respected, even though he did not know this at the time. His goal in writing the *Essais*, however, was initially set out to "describe man with utter frankness and honesty", and that stands the test of time—man (the population) is not going to change overnight, or even in centuries—we will still have the same problems, albeit more advanced in their solutions and differently approached.

Education enables us to think knowledgeably and insightfully not only about our own lives and experiences, but also about others' lives and experiences should we choose to, or even unconsciously when evaluating our own. Increased awareness and introspection can lead to us realising potentially awful things about people (although usually oneself), in the interim period between discovering said things and dealing with the traumas that they may bring up. Montaigne gave evidence for this in a way in the same essay, by saying that "[w]onderful brilliance may be gained for human judgment by getting to know men", where "men" here, like before, can also refer to your own being — « *le soi* ». Just talking or writing about one's own experience or thoughts can be a key to finding peace or happiness (Baikie and Wilhelm, 2005), the subjective or even imaginary, socially constructed concept that it may be to give us some sense of purpose as we move through life.

Montaigne's stance on Latin was interesting and again quite revolutionary for his time. In his era, Latin was the language of legalese and still to a large extent education, and he was forced to learn it by his learned, monied parents: "it was an inviolable rule, that neither himself, nor my mother, nor valet, nor chambermaid, should speak anything in my company, but [...] Latin words." He includes copious quotes in Latin

throughout all his essays, perhaps to make himself seem traditionally educated and have his views more universally respected. His choice of quotes are almost all from one of Montaigne's greatest influences: Plutarch (Friedrich and Desan, 1991, page 71), who was revolutionary in his own way with his writing many years earlier—but not revolutionary enough for Montaigne who could always try harder. Montaigne attacks the State over its methods of teaching everything. Montaigne viewed teaching methods of the time to be too prescriptive, not leaving enough time to students for recreation, original thought, and for non-academic subjects and past-times such as reading fables or poetry, for which he declared at the start that he had "a special affection" and which can also enrich the learning experience while also being an enjoyable hobby and escape from everyday problems, even at that young an age. This was partly down to his parents, as he states just after the passage on Latin that he was taught Greek from his father "by way of sport, tossing our declensions to and fro." He goes on to give some context to his views on teaching methods, saying that his father "advised to make me relish science and duty by an unforced will, and of my own voluntary motion, and to educate my soul in all liberty and delight", where "liberty" is a key adjective here as it goes to show that children should not be constrained by an adult's way of thinking.

Relatedly, he quotes Plato in this particular essay on education: "[t]he authority of those who teach is very often a hindrance to those who wish to learn" (page 55). There is always an underlying fear in any student of teachers getting angry at a wrong answer, and pupils not wanting to respond for fear of being labelled as unintelligent, or ridiculed. These things are most definitely not happiness. In using Plato's quote, he refers here to the methods of scholar Socrates—of whom Plato was a student—who always let his students speak first before speaking with any preconceived judgements or prejudices himself, either directly or indirectly, so as to not influence them, thereby provoking entirely original thought. This gives power to the student, and more confidence, as can be seen in a research paper by Holden and Schmit in 2002. Both Socrates and Montaigne admit readily that they do not consider themselves knowledgeable, simply wise from thinking. Socrates famously admitted "I know that I know nothing", and Montaigne followed that with similar: "[n]othing is so firmly believed as that which we least know" (from Book I, chapter 32). Also, as if to reinforce the point, he asks a rhetorical question in another of his essays—chapter 12—"[w]hat do I know?", thus reinforcing his overarching sceptic ideologies. This self-confidence—alternatively viewed as self-deprecation—strange as it may seem, leads the person to not have an inferiority complex, because they know that they are ignorant yet wise in realising that in reality they have as much reason as anyone else to feel superior—that is, none—because we all fight our own battles and "know" different things, however flimsy that word may be now. His reference to olden days, even then, with Plato and Socrates, gives weight to his arguments because they have been proposed or supported previously by respected thinkers. It is also important not to think we know too much, or boast about what we believe to know, as "[t]he plague of man is boasting of his knowledge", and this is an important lesson about humility for everyone, not just those in education, because boasting can cause superficial happiness (Khattak and Ashfaq, 2014) after the time we have outsmarted or put down our friends or enemies.

He again infers happiness and moral enrichment as the purpose of education rather than blindly memorising facts or numbers: "an accomplished man [...] [is] better than a scholar" (page 54). The ideal pupil should "taste things, select them, and distinguish them by [their] own powers of perception" (also page 54) and overall that "too much knowledge could prove a burden" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2014), where knowledge in this case, as mentioned in the paragraph above, comes from books or tutors, not the inquisitive minds of the children themselves. This then calls on the child's natural abilities and senses, not just the metaphorical "regurgitation" (*« regorger »*) of facts—a good digestive metaphor for lapping up ideas without thought as to their origins, like we do with food when we are very hungry, or water when we are parched. Overall this viewpoint justifies his sustained emphasis on education through philosophy and thinking for oneself throughout every one of his essays on education. Indeed, it is still relevant in today's French society, especially in later school years with philosophy being an important and highly weighted subject in the *Baccalauréat*.

Montaigne criticises not only all of the above, but class sizes and group-based learning (Bac.). These criticisms are still perfectly valid today, with class sizes averaging 26 pupils at all stages of education in a 2011 report by the Department for Education and strictly limited to 30 pupils for ages five to seven "to help raise standards" (GOV.UK, 2015). A smaller class size is presumed to enable more focused, one-to-one teaching, which is vital in the early years of education, and apparent in Krassel and Heinesen (2014) and anecdotal evidence from students progressing from primary to secondary school in Hong Kong (Zhao in the *South China Morning Post*, 2015). This comes back to happiness in that if a child feels valued in his or her lessons, they are more likely to feel happy (Barragan, 2008). Montaigne's recommendations and the aforementioned associated evidence for them have gone a long way towards proving that he was right all those years ago.

On a more personal level, not explicitly about education but leading on from his long treatise about it and in the same essay—"On the Education of Children"—, Montaigne states that "[m]ixing with the World has a marvellously clarifying effect on a man's judgement," emphasising patience, adventure and thinking outside of the box as it were. Yet, in the previous few pages he had lamented man's selfishness with the attack: "[i]n this school of human intercourse there is one vice that I have often noted; instead of paying attention to others, we make it our whole business to call attention to ourselves." It is possible that he meant that in order to feel fulfilled, we need to think of others before ourselves, like the maxim "do unto others as you would have them do unto you"—treat others how you would wish to be treated by them. This would have been fairly common as Montaigne was a religious man, a Roman Catholic, yet a sceptic, but still believed in the right way to do things, hence his copious amounts of writing about life in his *Essays*. "Let an honest curiosity be instilled in [the child], so that [they] may inquire into everything", he writes on page 61, again emphasising individuality, patience and self-providing happiness through wisdom. "Honest" is an important adjective here because without honesty, no-one can be truly happy, althogh some would argue that sometimes lying is better for the other person (DePaulo et al., 1996). Eventually this eats away at people, however, leading to unhappiness and a sense of regret, leading to more unhappiness later in life (Bussey, 1992) hence the common teaching that "honesty is always

the best policy". "Honest curiosity" is interesting too, combining the two central words to this quote, because it implies that some curiosities or interests are potentially adult-led, adult-imposed, and things that do not entirely interest the child, which could either eventually brew and have them eventually like them and be happy about this newfound knowledge or skill, or become even more unhappy because they are being forced to study, read or play something they hate.

Overall, happiness was a very large part of Montaigne's teachings, analyses and stance on life. His opinions and suggestions throughout all of his Essays, have been influential in planning the best modern education. He was a sceptic, so had to find happiness anywhere he could to save himself from despair at the rest of the world, and that came through freedom of thought (a cornerstone of scepticism itself) and liberty to do what he wished. That could be seen as at odds with education, because the classroom is set up with constraints, but those are only physical, not mental, and pupils should be encouraged to challenge them in the pursuit of happiness and pleasure.

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