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Making Sense of Education

Do you have to graduate from college to be educated? Sure, a diploma is an undisputable documented proof of someone's education, but who was the first teacher in history? Definitely, not a college graduate. Moreover, education does not necessarily equal success. In fact, history knows many examples of successful people who are not college graduates, like David Beckham or Oprah Winfrey. Even more interestingly, in *Thirteen Senses* by Victor Villaseñor, Salvador was one of the richest men in San Diego County without even knowing how to read and write. Although such examples are impressive, they are exemptions rather than a rule. Extensive evidence demonstrates a correlation between poverty and lack of education. Thanks to modern information technology, today, more and more people have access to education throughout the world; however, if used wrongly, same technologies can also deteriorate mental development. In my subjective view, an educated person is one who thinks critically, knows the concepts of science, has a profession, and never stops learning.

The big aspect of education is critical thinking ability, which means reading between the lines, questioning every piece of information, and ability to make a point with an argument. The critical thinking requires open mind and constant hunger for new data and ideas, even when reading and writing is against the law. Before the American Civil War, in Missouri, there was an enslaved man called Frederick Douglas. Highly motivated to learn to read and write, he broke slave codes, existing that time in the southern American states. His mentors were his mistress and the poor white boys, who were secretly tutoring him in exchange for bread. (Douglas)

Through reading, Douglas became exposed to abolitionist ideas, which he later promoted in his *Northern Star* newspaper. He became literate despite complete lack of support in his studies, discouraged by slave-owning society. Through reading, Frederick Douglas tasted freedom, and through his writing, he introduced the other side of the story to American citizens, speeding up the series of events leading to abolition of slavery in this country.

Today, children do not read as intensely as previous generations used to, and convenient but distracting technology may play a role in this decline. “By offering children candy-coated books, multimedia is guaranteed to sour them on unsweetened reading. It makes the printed page look even more boring than it used to look,” writes David Gelernter in his article “Unplugged: The Myth of Computers in the Classroom,” published in 1994. In Gelernter’s view, multimedia and hypermedia accent readers’ attention on pictures, video, and disjoined paragraphs, making it convenient to get an idea about some phenomenon but unnecessary to follow a story. This may be a reason why many students are struggling with composition and reading large texts. As a tutor and lab aide in Riverside City College, I constantly see people who find it difficult reading whole sentences; instead, they jump from one word to another relentlessly and get easily upset with "too complicated" instructions, which often do not exceed three pages. In an argument, these people tend to exploit phrases taken out of context, which reveals their low education level. If the information consists of short unordered pieces scattered through an individual’s memory, following logic and providing a sustained argument is a challenging task.

While learning in a relaxing manner, using modern technologies, is beneficial in many cases, relying on computers at all time can cause decline in literacy. Word editor programs are great in that, in contrast with pens and typewriters, they eliminate writer’s fear of misspelling, mistyping, or wrong word choice. These “allow-me” programs fix errors using spell checker and fix prose by offering a better fitting word. (Gelernter) For example, Microsoft Word suggests

replacing “in order to” with “to,” and “as long as” with “if.” While paper-saving, shortened words may lack expressivity, thus, giving less emotions to a reader, making a text “dry.” Extensive chatting, where people use shortened words and abbreviations, may interfere with student literacy. Young people today may insert “u” in place of “you” or “fyi” in place of the whole phrase in their course papers, which is casual in social media but inappropriate in academic writing. Computers may and should be used in education, but not to the extent that students have no idea of the correct spelling just because machines do all the work for them.

Reading and writing makes a person literate but not yet educated; to be appreciating in reading and persuasive in writing and speaking, one needs to be an erudite in math, sciences, geography, and history. Somebody may ask why arts and humanities professionals would care about trigonometry, semi-conductors, and stereoisomers. My answer will be that artists, presenters, and journalists, who want to be taken seriously, must be perceptive of the world they live in to deliver messages to the public more effectively. How could one depict and comment on phenomena related to nature, healthcare, business, or legislature if a person lacks elementary knowledge in math and chemistry? On the other side, how could statistics be applied if a mathematician does not account for history and culture than have shaped different parts of the world? General education requirements are intended to supplement any college major so that a college graduate have sufficient understanding of how the world works. Without math on at least pre-calculus level, basic physical and life science, geography and history, a person can only be partially educated.

Being comfortable with numbers and scientific concepts allows educated people to comprehend news and be in touch with new technologies, as well as to see clearly their pros and cons. During my research on *American Lawn Insanity* project, I learned that many people are brainwashed by American dream advertisements, gas companies, and lawn-care industries

because they have no clue about air pollution and global warming. In other words, lack of erudition in science turns people into blind consumers of socially irresponsible businesses. For the same reason, racism still exists in some areas of the United States. Some uneducated people associate darker skin colors with low intellect, uncivilized behavior, and crime, while educated ones know that active melanocytes in epidermis have nothing to do with anything except sunlight protection, vitamin D storage, and immune system. Consequently, educated people, having conceptual understanding of science and a sense of world map and history, are not easily brainwashed with crazy nationalist ideas and not easily converted into brain-dead zombies, acting as they are told to by greedy politicians and Madison-Avenue businesses.

Technology appears to be extremely useful in studying science, math, history, and geography, but it can also be damaging to human calculating abilities. In Japan, children in elementary and junior high schools are not allowed to use calculators because "the primary emphasis is on helping students develop their mental abilities," according to a Japanese educator. Meanwhile, an American high-school principal reassures that "drilling addition and subtraction in an age of calculators is a waste of time." (Gelernter) Yes, using a calculator to find a sine of 16.42-degree angle is more practical with a calculator, but is it right to use a calculator for such elementary problems as multiplying 7 times 11? No wonder, American teenagers are made fun of throughout the world for their poor arithmetic skills as they rank behind many other developed nations, according to international math and science assessments. (DeSilver)

Despite of possible negative effects of computers on children, they are great for studying science, history, and geography. Interactive Web applications, such as Google Maps, Khan Academy, Learn.Genetics, Histography, and Wikipedia, are great supplemental online sources, making science tangible to students. Although inspiring and informative, interactive maps and simulations should be used in addition, but not in place of main learning resources, because

science and history cannot be fully understood without narratives, available in textbooks and as lectures by flesh-and-blood teachers. Technology provides students with enhanced tools that can spark their interest to learn, so computers should be used in schools in moderation for science and history classes.

Although general erudition and critical thinking skills allow a person to make informed decisions and communicate with various people on various topics, no one has complete education until he or she has a profession. People with specialization possess deep knowledge and skills in a chosen area, and others look up to them for their services and expert advice. Being a professional allows a person to be a productive member of society, expands job opportunities, and secures a paycheck. Respect and financial stability are great motivators for young people to go to college for a degree and get a chance to enter a specific job market, even with minimal starting pay. Getting successful in a chosen profession means having a purpose in life, something to wake up daily for.

An educated person with a specialization is able to support oneself financially and practically. Other than just a paycheck, a skillful person can provide professional services to loved ones, free of charge or with a big discount, which not only helps to save money but also improves trust between family members and friends. For example, a dentist may repair a caries on a friend's tooth by charging him or her minimally, and later, that friend can do something in return, such as promoting a dentist friend on social media. While it may seem easier to simply pay, for both sides, helping each other strengthens friendship and expands professional network. In addition, regular meeting with other qualified people, working for the same company or on the same project, gives a professional the feeling of belonging. Specialization also helps a person fulfill his or her potential and allows him or her to feel useful and independent. In contrast, staying unqualified for a lifetime can bring boredom, loneliness, and poverty – situations that

educated people try to avoid. Finally, skilled professionals are given a green light to arrange their lives independently. Independent and responsible adults can make great spouses and parents, so having a good profession likely leads to happy families and happy lives.

After a student completed his or her coursework and received a degree, his or her education has not finished. Truly educated people realize that the more they learn the more unexplored areas open to them, so education is a lifetime process. Learning to speak a new language, play a musical instrument, visiting new places and meeting new interesting people are a few of hundreds of ways to maintain one's personal growth. For example, I like dancing Zumba and learning languages; both help me improve physically, intellectually, and emotionally. Lifelong education does not involve boring book craving or formula memorization; in opposite, one can follow own heart and explore interests freely, with zero pressure.

The secret to successful lifelong learning is genuine interest and relaxation rather than a wrestling. In her article "How not to raise a Workaholic," Vicki Abeles blames a current high-school system in killing child creativity by making studying a race instead of enjoyment. Constant stress and wearing out competition for grades and college admissions take away such leading force of education as passion. In my experience, I disliked chemistry for years because this class had been associated in my head with high school pressure and a threatening teacher. However, after many years, when I gave it a second shot, chemistry turned out to be a very interesting subject to me; probably, because I liked the professor, the textbook, and the surroundings in the classroom and the lab. Therefore, positive emotions greatly improve student learning abilities, and tackling an old college subject with a different approach can bring benefits to adult students, regardless of their age.

Inspiring young people to love learning is as important as teaching them grammar, math, and behavior. Opposite to USA, where curriculum is highly structured and tests are standardized,

Finland have created an effective learning environment, in which a school is an enjoyment rather than an obligation. In Finnish schools, children are allowed to play and daydream, and they spend time on fresh air after each class. Small class sizes allow teachers to pay attention to every student, and the teacher's figure there is highly respectful. As a result, Finnish students have the highest exam scores in the Western world as they study and have fun at the same time. (Doyle) Consequently, underestimating a fun side of studying is a mistake of many schools of the world, including American ones. Giving students dislike for learning, rather than love for it, is a no-win situation: as soon as they graduate, unhappy students will prefer to throw away their textbooks, while happy ones will passionately continue to learn throughout their lives. When we are passionate about something, our memory acts like a sponge, so looking at a studied topic from an interesting angle is a very effective learning strategy.

Summarily, education is a combination of critical thinking, erudition, specialization, and continuous learning. Educated people have more chances to succeed in life. In Frederick Douglas case, literacy brought him freedom. In poor countries and many American towns, people are brainwashed by politicians and businesses due to lack of erudition. Unexplored interests and unrevealed talents push young people to choose wrong professions, making them unhappy in their adult lives. Finally, halting in lifelong learning, with time, cancels out achievements of a college degree: the intellect declines and skills become sloppy. Depending on a career, a person can get education outside a college: by reading books and practicing skills in the real world. Numerous celebrities are the living evidence of "street-smart" education. Lifelong learning, in or out of college, increases one's chances to land a decent job and build an impressive network. However, the biggest benefit of education is being an interesting person to others and to oneself.

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