Education for Civil and Active life

Joseph Priestley

A schoolmaster at a Protestant Dissenting academy, Priestley was an educational innovator who introduced science, math, and commerce into the curriculum to better train students for an "active life" of business and citizenship. Ancient languages and the maxims of revered antiquity, he believed, would "not suit the world as it is at present. This selection is from Priestley's 1765 Essay on a Course of Liberal Education for Civil and Active Life.

It seems to be a defect in our present system of public education that a proper course of studies is not provided for gentlemen who are designed to fill the principal stations of active life, distinct from those which are adapted to the learned professions. We have hardly any medium between an education for the counting-house, consisting of writing, arithmetic and merchants' accounts and a method of institution in the abstract sciences: so that we have nothing liberal that is worth the attention of gentlemen, whose views neither of these two opposite plans may suit.

Formerly, none but the clergy were thought to have any occasion for learning. It was natural therefore that the whole plan of education from the grammar school to the finishing at the university, should be calculated for their use. If a few other persons who were not designed for holy orders, offered themselves for education, it could not be expected that a course of studies should be provided for them only. And indeed, as all those persons who superintended the business of education were of the clerical order and had themselves been taught nothing but the rhetoric, logic and school-divinity, or civil law, which comprised the whole compass of human learning for several centuries, it could not be expected that they should entertain larger or more liberal views of education; and still less that they should strike out a course of study for the use of men who were universally thought to have no need of study; and of whom few were so sensible of their own wants as to desire any such advantage....

That the parents and friends of young gentlemen destined to act in any of these important spheres may not think a liberal education unnecessary to them and that the young gentlemen themselves may enter with spirit into the enlarged views of their friends and tutors, I would humbly propose some new articles of academical instruction, such as have a nearer and more evident connection with the business of active life, and which may therefore bid fairer to engage the attention and rouse the thinking powers of young gentlemen of an active

genius. The subjects I would recommend are civil history and more especially the important objects of civil policy; such as the theory of laws, government, manufactures, commerce, naval force etc., with whatever may be demonstrated from history to have contributed to the flourishing state of nations, to rendering a people happy and populous at home, and formidable abroad; together with those articles of previous information without which it is impossible to understand the nature, connections, and mutual influences of those great objects.

To give a clearer idea of the subjects I would propose to the study of youth at places of public and liberal education, I have subjoined plans of three distinct courses of lectures, which, I apprehend, may be subservient to this design, divided into such portions as experience has taught me, may be conveniently discussed in familiar lectures of an hour each.

The first course is on the study of history in general and in its most extensive sense. It will be seen to consist of such articles as tend to enable a young gentleman to read history with understanding, and to reap the most valuable fruits of that engaging study. I shall not go over the particulars of the course in this place: let the syllabus speak for itself. Let it only be observed that my view was not merely to make history intelligible to persons who may choose to read it for their amusement, but principally to facilitate its subserviency to the highest uses to which it can be applied; to contribute to its forming the able statesman, and the intelligent and useful citizen. It is true that this is comprising a great deal more than the title of the course will suggest. But under the head of *Objects of attention to a reader of history,* it was found convenient to discuss the principle of those subjects which every gentleman of a liberal education is expected to understand, though they do not generally fall under any division of the sciences in a course of academical education: and yet, without a competent knowledge of these subjects, no person can be qualified to serve his country except in the lowest capacities.

This course of lectures, it is also presumed, will be found to contain a comprehensive system of that kind of knowledge which is peculiarly requisite to gentlemen who intend to travel. For, since the great objects of attention to a reader of history and to a gentleman upon his travels are evidently the same, it must be of equal service to them both, to have their importance and mutual influences pointed out to them.

It will likewise be evident to any person who inspects this syllabus, that the subject of commerce has by no means been overlooked. And it is hoped that when those gentlemen who are intended to serve themselves and their country in the respectable character of merchants have heard the great maxims of commerce discussed in a scientifical and connected manner, as they deserve, they will not easily be influenced by notions adopted in a random and hasty manner, and from superficial views of things, whereby they might otherwise be induced to enter into measures seemingly gainful at present but in the end prejudicial to their country, and to themselves and their posterity, as members of it.

The next course of lectures, the plan of which is briefly delineated, is upon the history of England, and is designed to be an exemplification of the manner of studying history recommended in the former course, in which the great uses of it are shown, and the actual progress of every important object of attention distinctly marked, from the earliest accounts of the island to the present time.

To make young gentlemen still more thoroughly acquainted with their own country, a third course of lectures (in connection with the two others) is subjoined, viz. on its present constitution and laws. But the particular uses of these two courses of lectures need not be pointed out here, as they are sufficiently explained in the introductory addresses prefixed to each of them.

That an acquaintance with the subjects of these lectures is calculated to form the statesman, the military commander, the lawyer, the merchant and the accomplished country gentleman, cannot be disputed. The principal objection that may be made to this scheme is the introduction of these subjects into academies, and submitting them to the examination of youth, of the age at which they are usually sent to such places of education. It will be said by some that these subjects are too deep and too intricate for their tender age and weak intellects; and that, after all, it can be no more than an outline of these great branches of knowledge that can be communicated to youth....

I am aware of a different kind of objection from another quarter which it behooves me not to overlook. The advocates for the old plan of education and who dislike innovations in the number or the distribution of the sciences in which lectures are given, may object to the admission of these studies, as in danger of attracting the attention of those students who are designed for the learned professions and thereby interfering too much with that which has been found by the experience of generations, to be the best for scholars, the proper subjects of which are sufficient to fill up all their time, without these supernumerary articles. I answer that the subjects of these lectures are by no means necessary articles of a mere scholastic education, but that they are such as scholars ought to have some acquaintance with, and that without some acquaintance with them, they must on many occasions appear to great disadvantage in the present state of knowledge.

Time was when scholars might with a good grace disclaim all pretensions to any branch of knowledge, but what was taught in the universities. Perhaps they would be the more revered by the vulgar on account of such ignorance, as an argument of their being more abstracted from the world. Few books were written but by critics and antiquaries for the use of men like themselves. The literati of those days had comparatively little free intercourse but among themselves; the learned world and the common world being much more distinct from one another than they are now. Scholars by profession read, wrote, and conversed in no language but the Roman. They would have been ashamed to have expressed themselves in bad Latin, but not in the least of being guilty of any impropriety in the use of their mother tongue, which they considered as belonging only to the vulgar.

But those times of revived antiquity have had their use, and are now no more. We are obliged to the learned labors of our forefathers for searching into all the remains of antiquity, and illustrating valuable ancient authors; but their maxims of life will not suit the world as it is at present. The politeness of the times has brought the learned and the unlearned into more familiar intercourse than they had before. They find themselves obliged to converse upon the same topics. The subjects of modern history, policy, arts, manufactures, commerce etc. are the general topics of all sensible conversation. Everything is said in our own tongue, little is even written in a foreign or dead language; and every British author is studious of writing with propriety in his native English. Criticism, which was formerly the great business of a scholar's life, is now become the amusement of a leisure hour, and this but to a few; so that a hundredth part of the time which was formerly given to criticism and antiquities is enough in this age to gain a man the character of a profound scholar. The topics of sensible conversation are likewise the favorite subjects of all the capital writings of the present age which are read with equal avidity by gentlemen, merchants, lawyers, physicians, and divines.

Now, when the course of reading, thinking and conversation, even among scholars, is become so very different from what it was, is it not reasonable that the plan of even scholastic education should in some measure vary with it? The necessity of the thing has already in many instances forced a change, and the same increasing necessity will either force a greater and more general change, or we must not be surprised to find our schools, academies, and universities deserted as wholly unfit to qualify men to appear with advantage in the present age.

In many private schools and academies, we find several things taught now which were never made the subjects of systematical instruction in former times; and in those of our universities in which it is the interest of the tutors to make their lectures of real use to their pupils, and where lectures are not mere matters of form, the professors find the necessity of delivering themselves in English. And the evident propriety of the thing must necessarily make this practice more general, notwithstanding the most superstitious regard to established customs.

But let the professors conduct themselves by what maxims they please, the students will of course be influenced by the taste of the company they keep in the world at large, to which young gentlemen in this age have an earlier admission than they had formerly. How can it be expected that the present set of students for divinity should apply to the study of the dead languages with the assiduity of their fathers and grand-fathers when they find so many of the uses of those languages no longer subsisting? What can they think it will avail them to make the purity of the Latin style their principal study for several years of the most improvable part of their life, when they are sensible that they shall have little more occasion for it than other gentlemen, or than persons in common life when they have left the university? And how can it be otherwise but that their private reading and studies should sometimes be different from the course of their public instructions, when the favorite authors of the public, the merits of whom they

hear discussed in every company, even by their tutors themselves, write upon quite different subjects?

In such a state of things, the advantage of a regular systematical instruction in those subjects which are treated of in books that in fact engage the attention of all the world, the learned least of all excepted, and which enter into all conversations where it is worth a man's while to bear a part, or to make a figure, cannot be doubted. And I am of opinion that these studies may be conducted in such a manner as will interfere very little with a sufficiently close application to others. Students in medicine and divinity may be admitted to these studies later than those for whose real use in life they are principally intended; not till they be sufficiently grounded in the classics, have studied logic, oratory, and criticism, or anything else that may be deemed useful, previous to those studies which are peculiar to their respective professions; and even then these new studies may be made a matter of amusement, rather than an article of business....

Some may object to the encouragement I would give the students to propose objections at the time of lecturing. This custom, they may say, will tend to interrupt the course of the lecture, and promote a spirit of impertinence and conceit in young persons. I answer that every inconvenience of this kind may be obviated by the manner in which a tutor delivers himself in lecturing. A proper mixture of dignity and freedom (which are so far from being incompatible that they mutually set off one another) will prevent, or repress, all impertinent and unseasonable remarks, at the same time that it will encourage those which are modest and pertinent.

But suppose a lecturer should not be able immediately to give a satisfactory answer to an objection that might be started by a sensible student. He must be conscious of his having made very ridiculous pretensions and having given himself improper airs, if it give him any pain to tell his class that he will reconsider a subject, or even to acknowledge himself mistaken. It depends wholly upon a tutor's general disposition, and his usual manner of address, whether he lose or gain ground in the esteem of his pupils by such a declaration. Every tutor ought to have considered the subjects on which he gives lectures with attention, but no man can be expected to be infallible. For my own part, I would not forgo the pleasure and advantage which accrue both to my pupils and to myself from this method, together with the opportunity it gives me of improving my lectures, by means of the many useful hints which are often started in this familiar way of discoursing upon a subject, for any inconvenience I have yet found to attend it or that I can imagine may possibly attend it....

Some may perhaps object to these studies as giving too much encouragement to that turn for politics which they may think is already immoderate in the lower and middle ranks of men among us. But must not political knowledge be communicated to those to whom it may be of real use, because a fondness for the study may extend beyond its proper bounds and be caught by some persons who had better remain ignorant of it? Besides, it ought to be considered that how ridiculous soever some may make themselves by pretensions to politics, a true

friend of liberty will be cautious how he discourages a fondness for that kind of knowledge which has ever been the favorite subject of writing and conversation in all free states. Only tyrants and the friends of arbitrary power have ever taken umbrage at a turn for political knowledge and political discourses among even the lowest of the people. Men will study and converse about what they are interested in especially if they have any influence; and though the ass in the fable was in no concern who was his master, since he could but carry his usual load, and though the subjects of a despotic monarch need not trouble themselves about political disputes and intrigues which never terminate in a change of measures, but only of men—yet, in a free country where even private persons have much at stake, every man is nearly interested in the conduct of his superiors, and cannot be an unconcerned spectator of what is transacted by them. With respect to influence, the sentiments of the lowest vulgar in England are not wholly insignificant, and a wise minister will ever pay some attention to them.

It is our wisdom, therefore, to provide that all persons who have any influence in political measures be well instructed in the great and leading principles of wise policy. This is certainly an object of the greatest importance. Inconveniences ever attend a general application to any kind of knowledge and no doubt will attend this. But they are inconveniences which a friend to liberty need be under no apprehensions about.

I may possibly promise myself too much from the general introduction of the studies I have recommended in this Essay into places of liberal education, but a little enthusiasm is always excusable in persons who propose and recommend useful innovations. I have endeavored to represent the state of education in this view as clearly and as fully as I have been able, and I desire my proposals for emendations to have no more weight than the fairest representation will give them in the minds of the cool and the unbiased.