
'EDUCATION' UNDER CONSUMER-CAPITALISM, AND THE SIMPLER WAY ALTERNATIVE

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1. INTRODUCTION

In consumer-capitalist society ‘education’ has little to do with Education. The following is a brief summary of the general critical perspective radical education theorists have been elaborating. This perspective holds that, currently, schools and universities:

- Train workers, very well. They develop the skills and more importantly the dispositions required to staff the industrial machine with obedient, diligent and skilled workers who will accept hierarchy and authority, turn up on time, work hard, do what they are told, consume, and not expect to have control over their situation.
- Legitimise social position and inequality. Those who fail at school learn that they do not have ‘brains’ and therefore do not deserve good jobs and life chances. This helps to make inequality in society seem inevitable and legitimate.
- Turn out competitors; people who believe in and love competition, and therefore accept winner-takes-all society; see themselves as deserving their hard-earned privileges, and see losers as deserving their fate; focus on advancing their own welfare without much interest in the public good or collectivism and who see as legitimate a system which allows the super-rich to thrive.
- Help to produce enthusiastic consumers, people who are keen to get ahead, succeed and get rich, who identify modernity and progress with affluence and see Western ways as the goal for the Third World, and who accept the market system and think technical wizardry will solve all problems. Just as they have passively consumed the activities, work and decisions presented by their teachers, so they passively consume the products, services and decisions presented to them by government, corporations, and professionals.
- Produce masses of politically passive, compliant, docile, uncritical ‘citizens,’ largely by devoting almost none of the standard 15+ years of ‘education’ to serious examination of their society’s fundamental faults. After that much schooling in intensively authoritarian conditions it is no surprise that they leave the functioning of their society to leaders and experts, show no inclination to take control over their collective fate, and do not question let alone protest the social injustices that their rich-world comfort inflicts on the rest of the world. They are well disposed to staff hierarchical organisations and do what their superiors tell them, to think in power terms, to strive to rise and then boss inferiors around.

These are not the only outcomes of schooling and they are not intended effects but they are outcomes of the ‘hidden curriculum’ to which radical education theorists have pointed. Years of experience within ‘educational’ institutions automatically, unwittingly, condition

inmates to these dispositions. For years students slave through mountains of work in the quest for credentials, knowing that these are the keys to good jobs and when the exams are over they burn their notes. Try testing them one year later to see if they remember any of the stuff 'learned.' But no one cares about this because the grade is all that matters. 'Poor students' are forced to 'learn' even when they hate it. Teachers punish them with righteous indignation at the lack of gratitude. Billions of children are forced to learn heaps of things they don't want to learn. This constitutes the world's greatest human rights abuse (not the most savage but the most widespread), but resistance is regarded as a stupid failure to appreciate the importance of 'education.'

Some good things happen at school, indeed even a little Education occurs. Highly skilled technocrats emerge, but a thoughtful, critical, responsible, caring and Educated citizenry does not. On the dimensions that matter, graduates from our educational systems are appallingly ignorant, insensitive and uncaring. Would a well-Educated Australian society have tolerated what the Howard government did to refugees? Would it be so grossly unaware and unconcerned about the rich world's exploitation of its empire? Would it be so suicidally unaware of the limits to growth predicament? Would it have gone along with the Neo-liberal globalisation hijack and the murderous policies of the IMF and World Bank? Would it have allowed Menzies to get Australia into the Vietnam War or Howard to get us into the Iraq war? Would it have felt not the slightest need to make amends for the millions we thereby helped to kill? Our 'educational' institutions are remarkably good at turning out acquiescent hard working competitive consumers preoccupied with self-indulgent goals and trivia, and guaranteed not to concern themselves much with the appalling events taking place all around them.

Schools are obviously not there to Educate. The people who run them say they are, but a glance at their organisation and products ridicules the claim. But there is a much more powerful proof: If Education was a goal then whether or not it was taking place would be assessed, and it isn't. School children are assessed to death. They constantly sit tests and exams, receive grades, and worry about results, but this is only to do with whether they have remembered the facts and skills drilled into them. None of it is concerned to see whether any Educational goals have been achieved. No school or university attempts to assess whether their graduates think about Shakespeare or evolution or Spinoza in their spare time, or do math problems for the fun of it, or read *War and Peace* again, or look at the world differently after having studied the French Revolution, or can think more clearly and critically now, or whether they love learning and hold it as a supreme concern in life. No such goals are even taken seriously enough to warrant checking whether any progress has been made towards them.

The ingrained institutionalised irrationality is evident in many unexamined practices, such as forcing kids to do sport, or anything, when they hate it. Consider the rationality of an examination situation where you are worried about what they will ask, or whether the stress and the lack of time will lead you to muck up your answer, or whether you learned the wrong material. If this happens then you are not in a situation where you are going to be able to show them what you know. Surely the point of examining should be to find out what you know. If the outcome can be influenced by factors such as chance, headaches, stress, and whether the question was on the material you crammed, then the examiners are hopelessly incompetent with respect to the logic of assessment. 'I studied hard and learned a lot about that topic, but I couldn't answer that particular question well. So there goes the career I'd hoped for.' Yet this is accepted, especially by the victims.

The comical part is that these practices are perpetuated by people who are supposed to be highly 'educated' and who one would therefore expect to be capable of identifying absurdly illogical and invalid practices. How is it that they never seem to ask, 'What will

this question indicate about the candidate, what is the empirical evidence on its predictive validity for any variable that matters, what will my defense be if I am sued for using a measure when I can't demonstrate its validity for any selection process?'

Long ago Berg and others showed the monumental irrationality of allowing school achievement to have much influence in the selection for jobs or courses. Grades achieved at school simply do not correlate well with success at anything, and should therefore not be given much if any weight in selecting people. This has been clearly understood for decades, but ignored – because everyone wants things the way they are.

Among the many unexamined paradoxes and irrationalities are questions like, why is most 'education' given to those who need it least, the 'brightest.' Why is it assumed that forcing people to learn things will Educate them, when Education involves becoming more intrinsically interested in what is being studied? Why does 'education' involve studying about six 'subjects' at high school and may be one in depth at university, when an Educated person is a generalist, interested in and informed about and able to converse on an extremely wide range of topics, and continually concerned to fill in the gaps? Why do people say 'I was educated at...,' as if their education was finished there and then, when Education is a process that never ends? If the point of Education is to nurture interest in the world, in thinking, exploring, revising ideas, systematising a world view, why is education cast in terms of punishment for deviance from authoritarian dictates, resistance, sin, coercion and compulsion? Similarly why is it cast so nastily in terms of superiority and inferiority, and of teachers who know and pupils who are ignorant and must be instructed? What has the power to coerce and punish got to do with Educating? Can it have any other than damaging effects? Why is it taken for granted if children resist being forced to learn things that are of no interest or apparent relevance to them they can be treated as being at fault, unwise and ungrateful, and punished until they conform? All this makes sense if the point of the exercise is to condition recalcitrant recruits to the discipline of the factory, the office and a lifetime paying off the mortgage, but if the point is to Educate then it can only prevent the achievement of the goal.

It is my firm belief that the net effect of schools is the prevention of Education. A few come out of their school years more intrinsically interested in Shakespeare or math or biology than when they went in, but most have their interest in the world and in learning and analyzing damaged or driven out. When they come in at the age of five they are very interested in the world and in learning, but where is the research showing that by their fifteenth birthday these dispositions have been enhanced?

Clearly schools are not there to Educate, or we would see if that is what they do. They are there to reproduce consumer-capitalist society. That is what everyone wants them to, and they do it well. That is why schools cannot be fixed. They cannot be reformed to not be riddled with authoritarian relations, learning masses of irrelevant and boring stuff, exams, credentials, failure and human rights abuse. If these features were eliminated then schools would not reproduce consumer-capitalist society. If you want schools without these characteristics you can only have them in a very different society, one that does not need schools designed to reproduce this society.

2. WHAT IF WE WANTED AN EDUCATION SYSTEM?

The following thoughts reflect my preferred conception of Education, although I think many would share it. This centres on goals such as developing personalities intensely interested in important issues; in learning about the world; thinking about social problems; what life is about; how one should live; the welfare of others; how we can make a better world;

constantly inquiring, exploring, thinking, and in becoming a wiser, better person. There is probably no point in distinguishing between Education and personal growth.

In my view the basic cognitive notion in Education is Dewey's focus on enabling one to make more meaning of the experiences one has. When geologists look at a landscape they literally 'see' more than most of us, because they understand *the significance of observations* which most of us would not recognize. They might note that the hills are very steep indicating that the valley is young. An Aborigine might notice a bent twig and scattered sand and 'see' that a lizard went that way this morning. This means that factual knowledge is only relevant to Education insofar as it enables interpretation of the world. Education is not primarily about learning facts and skills. It is about wanting to understand things better, and therefore realizing that at times it is useful to learn certain facts and theories for this purpose.

No goal of Education is more important than to foster a strong intrinsic *desire* to do this, to understand, make sense of, question, think about, interpret and find out more. The supreme goal of Education is therefore not cognitive; it is affective. It is to develop an intense and lasting intellectual curiosity which will motivate a ceaseless quest to understand the world, oneself, one's society – more adequately. There is therefore no such thing as an Educated person, as if the task could ever be completed, let alone by graduation day. The goal is a personality that derives deep intrinsic satisfaction from continually increasing the capacity to make sense of the world.

This conception includes the capacity and desire for clear and critical thinking, the readiness to debate, consider alternatives, evidence and argument, and the capacity to revise or drop unsatisfactory interpretations and theories. These ideas and dispositions must be deep, powerful and never-ending forces within personality, and sources of life satisfaction. Little or nothing of Educational significance has been achieved here if a person does not want to do these things, or if they are not primary drivers in the individual's life. For instance, knowledge which is not held on the understanding that it is for use in this quest is less than useless (as my remnant Latin testifies.) What is important here is the capacity for intellectual enthusiasm, to be fascinated and inspired. To Bertrand Russell 'zest' was a major educational goal, and Einstein recognised the capacity to wonder at the nature of things as being extremely important. Dewey and the Progressive educators realised that interest must lead.

Many radical implications follow when mere training and schooling have been separated from Education. The role of the Educator is to develop interest in topics, theories, fields and issues, to enchant and inspire, to create awe and wonder, and thereby to stimulate the desire to know more and to understand more deeply. Education therefore cannot be boring. If there is boredom Education cannot be occurring. Authority, power over others and punishment have no place in Education. They can only interfere with the achievement of the goal. Ideally Educators are wise friends with a strong interest in helping others to see the significance of things, to become inspired and to become wiser.

The individual controls his or her 'curriculum.' Only the individual knows what he or she wants to understand. This does not mean that there is no place for guidance and advice from others. Sometimes more experienced people can see that if a person studied particular topics he or she would be more able to make sense of an area of interest. Sometimes we can see that students would benefit if they studied something they are not currently interested in. The "teacher's" task is to get them to see the desirability of studying these things. A trusted helpful friend whose advice has been found to be valuable in the past should have little difficulty doing this, but if one can't then there is nothing to be gained by force.

Education is about individuals constructing, elaborating and revising their own worldview, because they want to do that. Our role as Educators is to facilitate these

processes. There is not likely to be much difficulty getting young people to see that the things we think are important actually are, and helping them to explore these before long. We would of course try hard to get them to explore the major conventional fields of study, and get to the stage where they wish to develop the thorough understanding that requires working through standard courses. Obviously exams, credentials, grading, graduation and compulsory attendance have nothing to do with any of this. There is a place for determining how well someone understands something, how coherent or sound their position on a topic is, or how well they can defend their views; and 'teachers' would help people do this evaluating. But exams, grades and credentials have no contribution to make. You would probably know how thorough your grasp of genetics or linguistics or black holes was.

When Education is the concern, teachers do most of the failing, not students. They are the one's who have to worry about what's the most effective book or experience to suggest, how effective they have been in stimulating interest and insight, whether they have contributed to Education.

A very important goal of Education, surely universally neglected, is to make sure young people grasp the concept of Education underlying this discussion; to see the importance and intrinsic value of seeking to understand the world; to see this as a guiding principle for how they will go through life, and to regard this orientation as a major source of life satisfaction. Like friendship, Education is not a means to anything – one either sees it as worthwhile in itself, or one does not. (No one told me. I had got through primary school, high school, a BA and many post-graduate courses, and indeed through an Education II Hons. strand, before I figured any of this out for myself.)

3. VALUES, DISPOSITIONS, AND PERSONALITY

The preceding thoughts have been mostly to do with the cognitive dimension of Education. Probably even more important are the affective and volitional aspects. Education is a matter of total personality development. We therefore have to grapple with questions about what kinds of qualities we want to see people develop. There is no correct list; this discussion can only be about one's preferences. Following are some characteristics that I would argue for.

More important than all the others must be what we could loosely identify as compassion or social responsibility, the readiness to think about and be concerned about the situation of others. This includes much more than the negative readiness to be disturbed when others are suffering. It includes the positive gaining of satisfaction from seeing others thrive, the desire to help, care and nurture. These are the necessary sources of the motivation to fix the world and of the collectivism without which a satisfactory society is impossible.

Another important dimension is to do with strength or resilience, the capacity to plod and grind when that's necessary, to stand firm or stand alone, to see it through, to get the job done, to be faithful to principles. Educative experience is not necessarily pleasant. Sometimes adversity and loss are powerful sources of personal growth.

'Discipline' is very important in Education, but it must be sharply distinguished from obedience. What we want is the capacity to apply oneself when one can see that is appropriate. Learning to knuckle down and do what you are told by a powerful authority figure is quite different.

Another very important affective element in Education is the capacity for appreciation, the ability to recognise and be grateful for life's gifts, for nature, one's own qualities and achievements, etc. This connects with simplicity and frugality, being content with enough, appreciating what one has and things that are free, being able to *be* rather than do. It

connects with nurturance; the capacity to feel good when one sees others thriving. It also involves a strong aesthetic element, the capacity to see beauty in things, and to be uplifted by creating. This is where the arts, nature, architecture, great cooking etc. come in. Education increases the capacity of such things to *inspire*. Possibly the worst thing about schooling is the deadening effect it has on the spirit. All those years of grind, boring work, discipline and obedience narrow and deaden consciousness and spirit.

4. THE EDUCATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SIMPLER WAY

Education can and would thrive in our new communities, based on The Simpler Way. We would be living in a situation crammed with systems, machines, devices, organisations, farms, animals, events and processes that are interesting, and we would be surrounded by knowledgeable people eager to discuss their domain. We would be dependent on systems that we must organise and run well. We would therefore be continually confronted with a wide range of technical, theoretical, social and ecological issues, and would be continually in conversation with others about what's happening and what needs doing and how best to organise. We would have to study, research and learn about things of vital interest to our communities and ourselves. The more knowledge and skills one has the more valuable one would be as a citizen. It would be an intellectually stimulating atmosphere. We would be surrounded by people who were experts at electronics, play writing, pottery, cooking, blacksmithing, grafting, astronomy, philosophizing, etc.

We would understand that our town could not function well without good citizens and as has been explained this would be a powerful Educational force, encouraging us to be responsible, careful, well-informed, and concerned with the public good. Then there would be all the creativity coming from maybe five days a week to give to art and craft, amid expert practitioners, and from the beautiful architecture and landscapes this would generate.

The average person would be a multi-skilled 'jack of all trades,' although most would also specialise in some fields. **In general credentials would be of no significance.** All that would matter is whether one could design and make and fix things. We would still need engineers and doctors who have certificates to say they have the required competence to do the more technically sophisticated tasks, but most of the necessary production and maintenance would be carried out by ordinary, but quite skilled, citizens.

We would have whatever formal provisions for learning that make sense, but it is not likely that we would have things resembling schools today. Most learning would take place as the work of running the town was being carried out, for instance as children accompanied older people on the working bees and at the committees and meetings. Courses would be organized and conducted as people felt the need. Some of these would run all the time but others would be organized irregularly as the need arose. For instance a group might ask the town's experts to run a course on lead light window making or greenhouse thermodynamics.

We would make sure each child (eventually) developed a sound grasp of the fields we think are important, keeping careful records, plotting how best to entice them into various areas. We would probably have some professional teachers to organise these things, but everyone in the town would be a teacher, conscious of the importance of us all learning and growing.

Training would of course be important. We need engineers and doctors and their training would surely include the basic processes we use now. We would need colleges and universities to produce technocrats and to conduct research. However it would be clearly understood that training is not Education and is nowhere near as important for the

individual or for society. Universities could again become primarily concerned with Educating.

Another crucial Educational task is to do with the reinforcement of those ideas and values that contribute to cohesion, solidarity, pride and morale. We must be continually conscious of these factors, whereas in all previous societies they have not been attended to, or not even recognised. We will be conscious of the need to think about how well the festivals, celebrations, town meetings and working bees are reinforcing town morale and mutual concern, readiness to contribute, enjoyment of giving and involvement. We will think about and research the experiences and conditions that reinforce the necessary ideas, values and dispositions. These subtle and powerful learnings and re-learnings might take place mostly at the level of cultural activities, through the experience of town festivals, folklore, customs and myths. We would have committees constantly thinking about and monitoring such things, although if all were going well, there would probably be no need to make a fuss about them.

We will devote many resources to Education. We will have developed the committees, advisors, resources, 'curricula,' experiences and situations that are most conducive to the above kinds of goals. Note again that we will all have most of the week to give to important concerns like this.

Once again we are confronted by the sharp contradiction between what happens in consumer-capitalist society and how things could be. Little Education can occur in the educational institutions of this society, because that is not their purpose and because the functions they perform are not compatible with Education. The educational institutions of consumer-capitalist society reproduce it very effectively. On the other hand, institutions and practices which Educated could only exist in a radically different society. The Simpler Way requires and enables Education.