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Education – its meaning, implementation, and value – has shifted significantly throughout history. Even the roots of its etymology reveal its complexity; education comes from the Latin *educere*, which some define as *bringing* or *drawing out* – education as finding and developing something within, centered around developing general skills – and others as *training* or being *led forth* – the cultivation of the mind with imparted knowledge, aiming for a knowledgeable population. These represent two fundamental pillars of thought on education’s purpose and scope, yet neither are complete individually. The purpose of education is to inspire and to guide its students along the empirical arts with emphasis on individuality and fostering passion, for it is both moral *and* practical.

In “Who Are You and What Are You Doing Here? A Word to the Incoming Class”, Mark Edmundson, a professor of English at the University of Virginia, places the purpose of education on the individual. Education, Edmundson argues, has been corrupted by societal influences, from eager parents imposing their wishes on their children to the continual societal upholding of poverty as failure. Students are often taught to follow what they are told to do – to get good grades, graduate from college, find a well-paying job – with little or no consideration of personal interest, dictated by blind orders of what society needs. Instead, education centers around the individual – finding work that is so personal and enjoyable that it “restores you as you

go” (Greene & Lidinsky, 468) – for the most valuable payment is not money but fulfillment. Thus, education serves to *bring out* what is within – to foster fascination in the individual.

On the other hand, in “Preface to *Cultural Literacy*”, Eric Donald. Hirsch Jr., a professor emeritus of education and humanities at the University of Virginia, maintains that the abstract notions of teaching general cognitive skills and content-neutral curriculum that have pervaded American education further the cycle of illiteracy and poverty. Instead, education should aim for *cultural literacy* – information required to thrive in the modern world, for culture, in accordance with anthropological study, revolves around commonly shared information. Hirsch argues for specific and content-driven education; thus, the purpose of education is to serve society’s interest in a literate *culture*, for effective communication and a society that supports mobility can be achieved only “by accumulating shared symbols, and the shared information that the symbols represent.” (Greene & Lidinsky, 57) To educate, then, is to *train* and *lead forth* the nation’s students on the same set of ideas, concepts, and knowledge.

Edmundson and Hirsch’s writings represent opposing perspectives on education; between focus on the individual and focus on society, the romantic appeal and the seemingly stone-cold practical one, bringing beyond what is within and imparting within what is beyond. I believe in Edmundson’s articulation of education for the individual, but ground his ideas with aspects of Hirsch’s argument. The purpose of education should be to inspire students, not strictly to teach and impart information; both *motivation* and *knowledge* are equally integral, but there is a direction. A motivated student will always surpass an unmotivated one in the end, even if they start with large knowledge deficiencies. Especially in an era where education is available to almost all, from community colleges with evening classes to a plethora of online courses, it is key to *inspire first*, and deliver knowledge second.

It is, of course, silly to suggest that the two are distinct – there is tremendous overlap, and content is inextricably tied to motivation; Hirsch is correct in pointing this out. The goal of education, then, should be to teach the “*empirical arts*” - studies that are *empirical* in that they are guided by practical content, but *artistic* in that the focus is on developing a deep-seeded understanding, individuality, and creativity within that realm. Consider mathematics: one cannot learn math without learning content, of course, but there is so much to explore and discover within the simple ideas without rushing ahead to “pile up information” (Greene & Lidinsky, 56), a core idea of Hirsch’s education philosophy. I followed a relatively standard math pathway with a curriculum that struck at the *art* of an empirical study – from constructions to proofs – and now I love math just as the 12-year-old prodigy who has mastered calculus does.

The core of Hirsch’s ideas, while masquerading under a tenor of practicality, has serious pragmatic deficits. In ignoring the individual, Hirsch accepts that all curricula are created and accepted equally by students. In my experience as a student, I have felt the impact of an education Hirsch advocates for: there is nothing more boring than a curriculum whose sole purpose is to tell students what to think day after day. What use are the high-minded virtues of a content-driven education if our nation’s schools are filled with bored and apathetic students? Is it that education can ignore the agency of individual students and prevent poverty by droves of all-star students that have faithfully studied the curriculum right to the door of the job market? Edmundson recognizes this erroneous assumption and makes clear that even at college – the highest level of academic achievement – students are never done learning.

Education centers around student initiative, and any educational system that ignores this will find that their students stop wherever the system drops them, if not earlier. Even as a drive to learn is anchored to content, it is possible – and much more effective – to forgo advancing

rapidly with content and ensure that students fully understand and appreciate what has been learned so far. A strong discovery-centric curriculum can give students of all abilities depth and interest in any subject, regardless how simple. Education, while serving society, is at its root for the individual. Passivity can do little; invigoration and fascination will always be able to overcome any knowledge deficit.

Works Cited

Edmundson, Mark. "Who Are You and What Are You Doing Here? A Word to the Incoming Class". *From Inquiry to Academic Writing: A Text and Reader*, edited by Stuart Greene and April Lidinsky, 5th ed., 2020. *Macmillan Learning*. Originally published in *Why Teach? In Defense of a Real Education*, 2013.

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