

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	4
Introduction.....	5
Problem with Binary Classification	6
Culture of Non-Productivity	8
Equity in Education.....	10
Importance of Character Education	11
Debunking Myths.....	14
Conformity and Creativity	15
Literally Illiterate	18
On Content-Based Marking	20
Learning, what is it?.....	21
Understanding Tutorial Schools	24
Big Picture	26
A General Theory Of Education, Interest and Passion.....	28
To Wonder is to Question.....	34
Rethinking Education.....	35
Bibliography.....	37

A GENERAL CRITIQUE OF FORMAL EDUCATION

Abstract

We live in a time where innovation fuels our engine of prosperity. Our education system needs to produce more innovators, not less. The computer, GPS, laser-beam and the Internet were not invented by looking within the enclosures of today, but by inventing tomorrow. We need to produce a generation of passionate people with a deep pursuit of intellect, equipped with the skills and aptitudes they require to succeed. Our education system needs to look beyond the next quarter of the fiscal balance and view this as an investment in our collective social enterprise. The cost of education may be great, but the cost of living in a world of insipidness is most certainly greater.

I will, hereinafter offer my thoughts on a highly idealized version of schooling that aims to create passionate learners and inventors of tomorrow. However, I must acknowledge the fact that some of the demands are nigh impossible under the current bureaucratic inefficiencies and the complex interplay between policy-makers and Educators and other priorities we as a society have collectively decided upon.

Just as it is impossible to ask an archer to shoot straight without a target; the objective of my proposal is not to create a cast-iron example for all future schools, but an example of what schools would want to work towards, maybe predicating some of our future pedagogical methods on some of the philosophies I will subsequently speak of.

Introduction

Within the walls of our schools, pupils are instructed to ‘Stand just there’, ‘Say just that’, ‘Check that box’, start your essays with ‘With reference to the Source’ or ‘Firstly- Secondly- Lastly-’ or ‘In terms of [generic concept]’ – (often substituted by ‘In term of’ because of poor language proficiency and the inability to even grasp the most basic of grammatical principles); this reliance on standardized methodologies and the overly-linearized pedagogical approaches to learning not only produces laughably bad Level 5 essay-question exemplars (which are available for public download; if you are looking for a good laugh, that is) for the city with the highest mean IQ in the entire world, but it is also paints a worrying picture of how low formal education has stooped to in recent years.

Table 1. Nobel Prizewinners by Nationality, 1901-2005

	Number of Nobel laureates	Share of Nobel laureates	Population in thousands (2005)	Share of population	Relative representation
USA	155	.1997	298,213	.0462	4.3225
Germany	81	.1173	82,689	.0128	9.1641
UK	67	.0863	59,668	.0092	9.3804
France	38	.0490	60,496	.0094	5.2128
Switzerland	24	.0309	7,252	.0011	28.0909
Japan	12	.0155	128,084	.0199	.7789
India	7	.0090	1,103,371	.1710	
China	6	.0077	1,315,844	.2040	.0377
Taiwan	2	.0026	22,894	.0035	.7429
South Korea	1	.0013	47,817	.0074	.1757

Consider the above relative representation of Nobel prize-winners from different countries; two things are evident; (1) Europeans are the recipients of the majority of the awards, while on one hand, (2) Asians are greatly under-represented. On the other hand, Asians top the charts for international standardized test scores and a myriad of other well-recognized ‘objective’ benchmarks for academic and intellectual progress. The stark contrast sends a clear message:

Asian students cannot think. If we want to move forward as a society as a whole, must we not acknowledge that there exists something wrong, something very wrong with our current system?

Problem with Binary Classification

The very nature of formal education in Hong Kong divides the classroom in two contrasting groups, those who conform and those who do not. Us or them, either-or, the compliant or the non-compliant. To the school administrator, it matters not what personal traits pupils come into the classroom with, the mission of the school administrator is to have young minds rid of its individualities that were brought into the classroom, and at its output – a homogeneous, obedient, and satisfied workforce. Constructed with the goal of instant gratification of passable academic results, the current system aims to exploit young minds - which are consistently surrounded by a world of new things, of their inborn curiosity to external stimuli. Instead of offering instruction and guidance, binary penalties are handed out for non-compliance in the classroom.

In behavioral therapy, rational decision-makers (we have no reason to assume that children are not rational agents), usually avoid aversive stimuli, we are neurologically wired to escape events that are associated with negative experiences. This pattern of negative reinforcement resembles that of when you accidentally touch a hot pot on your stove while cooking, within milliseconds of contact, your body will fire motor neurons from your synapses and you would lift your hand from the pot before you can even feel the heat. There is something biological and hard-wired in our brains that we cannot change.

How do pupils respond to negative reinforcement? Just like how your brain will think twice before exposing yourself to hurt the next time you cook, pupils gradually develop apathy towards learning, and in the end; they stop caring and stop responding to criticism. I say, this is the biggest reason why pupils drop out of secondary school, not as a result of their innate self-inability (mind you-this is a generalization) – but because that they have stopped caring.

Not only does this constant cycle of negative reinforcement creates an atmosphere of fear and doubt, which makes pupils call into question their own self-abilities- as they will be very much inclined to antagonize the very act of learning itself. They provide a pessimistic frame of

reference for what they should do; ‘Perhaps I should give up.’, ‘I should set lower goals for myself. Pupils in this way, are set up for long term failure because of the lack of Passion in learning. How can one succeed in doing something they consider dreadful? Such is impossibility.

As much as we would like to sugarcoat the act of learning – we all know it can be as fun, exhilarating and gratifying of a process as it can also be as daunting, discouraging and a demoralizing one. Chronic underachievers (in the most literal sense of the word I am referring to), who display signs of wit and intelligence in other non-academic fields, prevent themselves from getting hurt by not caring. This is why even after investing hours upon hours of time, and millions upon millions of dollars in educational funding into exposing younger children to literature, but somehow, somehow – most of them end up never reading outside a school setting. Just let that sink it for a bit – no books, bookless for the rest of their lives. While some attribute the disinterest in reading for pleasure with the negative association of literature with schoolwork – others attribute it to the prevalence of graded book reports-where often times it quickly descends into becoming a race to the bottom of who can copy SparkNotes without getting caught for plagiarism, or mandatory reading lists which forces students across diverse levels of linguistic proficiency and different degrees of competence through the same few hundreds of pages of pseudo-intellectually stimulating literature, the majority of which fail to evoke any interest among students – without considering the fact that: Explaining literature is a lot like dissecting a frog; although you learn a lot, but it also dies in the process. The moment you season reading with ‘rules’ or ‘principles’ that come prepackaged with the classroom setting, you have missed the point. So no, it does not matter how many times you explain how Animalism is a euphemism for Communism to your KS3 class, they still won’t get it because they do not care.

Consider this from the perspective of the pupil; they are given a choice to choose between:

Table 2. Binary options for pupils

Option (1)	Option (2)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performing boring, repetitive tasks that are neither interesting or stimulating 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confronting the possibility of failure 	

even though you have put in hundreds if not thousands of hours into working	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delaying instant gratification indefinitely until success 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being discouraged by systematic negative reinforcement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not caring

It can be viewed at a glance why many students choose not to care about learning when there exists this many hurdles to overcome in the learning process.

This is why you never see remedial classes work. More often than not, remedial classes by function – are not part of a constructive feedback loop; but as an extension to the existing performance-led segregation mechanism that continues to stifle student confidence at every corner. Every bit of that leftover confidence is required for someone already struggling to take Option (1). Remedial classes offer under-performing students an easy way out, an excuse to give up, a justification to stop caring.

What you want - is remedial action. For chronic under-achievers – the acquisition of non-cognitive skills are of a much greater importance than hard cognitive skills.

Culture of Non-Productivity

The Flynn effect proposes that average intelligence scales proportionally with better nutrition, education and media exposure. However, Hong Kong has reached a state of affluence where there exists diminishing returns as it reaches closer and closer to what economists call a ‘Happiness Asymptote’ - where further increases in personal income will not directly correspond to the betterment of the physical and mental well-being of the majority of individuals. The term ‘conspicuous leisure’ was coined by economist Thorstein Veblen over a century ago. Veblen pointed out that in many affluent societies; there exists a common trend among the hyper-rich – the desire to engage in visible leisure for the display or in attaining a higher social status.

Today, a similar behavior can be observed on a city-wide scale, the second-generation of the nouveau-rich, defined primarily by their given social status – take it to the next level. These people, frenzied by consumerist self-indulgence, are blinded by their own non-productivity and their obsession with leisure and entertainment. Intellectual non-productivity has become popular

in a new type of behavior I shall call ‘conspicuous ignorance’. Just as conspicuous leisure is found in all societies where stratification exists - the behavior of conspicuous ignorance is an unfortunate byproduct of the social affluence.

I find it appalling that the very act of doing nothing, sitting on your ass and the act of satisfying your worldly desires one after another is considered as a display of superior social status now. The Ignorant have cultivated an atmosphere of intellectual non-productivity where hard-work and dedication are frowned upon in a competition of whoever can put in least toil to maintain the barest subsistence of life.

This self-sense of cognitive superiority of the Ignorant on which they predicate their rigid principles that deny validity to foreign experiences. That can be observed on a city-wide scale decline in the acceptance of foreign ideas. The exemplification of moral-megalomania – where those of the conspicuously ignorant romanticize other peoples, treating them as less than human, seldom recognizing them as human beings of their own level. They are prisoners of their own ideologically-rigid and ill-mannered perspectives. The instance we overhear excuses for ignorance the likes of ‘Of what use is Mathematics when we have the calculator?’ or students boasting with pride about how little effort they put into studying - that is when we know we, as a society have failed. It is exactly this type of mentality that is fatal to academic progress and it seems as though our pupils no longer have the motivation to learn new things.

Like leopards who spend their entire lives in the zoo, they lose their predator instincts; they are unable to hunt- the privileged and politically-correct environment we have erected to surround our next generations in, will ultimately divorce them from the ability we as a species had used to survive - by observing, learning, and making decisions according to our own external senses. Unable to learn new things and lacking in the pursuit of intellect and curiosity, society in the near future will not go out with a bang, but with a whimper- as intellectual non-productivity leads to the destruction of society through collective intellectual exhaustion.

Those who are inflicted by these ideals, to varying degrees - are usually are so arrogant about non-productivity as to dismiss all opportunities for learning. Opportunities through which

they can develop and grow their personal character. Regardless, this is an epidemic that exists in and outside of our schools.

Equity in Education

Education is not democracy; it is not designed to be equal. I am not a preacher of feelgood opinions like how ‘TSA/BCA is neuro-degenerative when administered during prepubescent years.’, or how ‘We need a pluralistic and inclusive classroom.’, or worse yet ‘PC language in HEIs protects minority groups’ (Higher Education Institutions). We need tests to examine the ability of our students to find those that will take up preferential positions in our economy, or to facilitate policy making. The affairs concerning Education are inherently elitist, this is fact. And if you need a safe space, go see a therapist. Schools (HEIs in particular), are not meant to be safe spaces – ideas are meant to be challenged; every belief that you hold should be subject to external criticism and doubt. It is where new ideas are formulated through questioning, rethinking and reconstructing those of the old.

As much as we would like to fetishize the thought of adopting the Taiwanese model, it will never happen; but the reasons as to why this is the case exceeds the scope of this essay. Even in the educational ‘utopia’ that is Taiwan, there still exists intense competition among pupils for the admission of the more prestigious of HEIs. In economics, the Pareto principle of income distribution refers to the tendency for the wealth distribution of an economy to converge to an 80/20 equilibrium where 80% of the wealth belongs to the top 20% of the population. It is just nonsensical how some salivate over the thought of educational romanticism - the belief that through education and education alone; that everyone has a shot at moving up the socioeconomic ladder. If it is not already evident – not everyone can become professionals, not everyone can succeed.

Likewise, the instance we try to adopt the view that everyone should have equitable access to Education, we risk devaluing the achievements of all those who are above average in a destructive race to the bottom and most importantly – we step into very dangerous territories of infinite defragmentation of equality of outcome.