How we view education
By Karen Sieben

Statistics concerning student rankings worldwide show some variation, but generally all indicate student performance in the U.S. decreases with age\(^1\) and that ranking of students in reading, math, and science is “middling”\(^2\) compared to other countries in spite of time spent assessing deficiencies and money spent to develop new approaches and materials over the past few decades. We all can acknowledge diverse reasons for American performance often citing economic, cultural, lingual, and sociological data to explain the trouble. Those approaches are certainly valid and offer many insights as to how we might stop our educational slide in later years and our overall stagnation worldwide. However, it is our contention here that we have consistently used those approaches in the past and they have given us only modest, if any, real improvement. I contend that there is another element to the equation, and it is missing in most discussions of student success.

The element that is missing is the theme of Jin Li’s book on education, Cultural Foundations of Learning: East and West.\(^3\) Going beyond the common stereotypes of the Asian student as overstressed and overworked versus the Western student as lazy and obsessed with technology, Li explains that the very nature of what education is differs from East to West. Asians students do not study to become doctors, or lawyers to become successful. They do study to do such things, but they also know they have a responsibility to study to become wise. This view is not new to the West; in fact, it is at the heart of Western education at its very beginning with Plato who coined the phrase “philosophy” or love of wisdom, and the task of creating individuals who are wise is on the mind of every instructor in philosophy much of the time. It is what I do. So I suggest in accord with Li, that like the Asian model, philosophers have a good deal of experience explaining education as something very different from what is normally said about it, and we have accumulated much evidence to indicate we have a valid point. I submit that this element so essential to the Asian view of education is a serious missing element in improving American education.

While the view of education as a path to life lived wisely and well is still the focus of the Asian student, it has slipped away from the pragmatic, career orientation of most students today, and I believe most of those who educate them as well. There is nothing inherently wrong with a student’s decision to pick a major that suits his or her interests and dispositions, but to see education solely on that basis, misses one of the most valid reasons for education, the development of the mind with its diverse interests and the creation of the ideal of human life -- a knowledgeable person with a coherent worldview who can handle life well and with integrity no matter the ups and downs encountered along the way. Agreeably, this is not a mindset accepted by the average American; it is a philosophical ideal which philosophers have promoted for thousands of years which may to some seem out of fashion and

---

\(^1\) These statistics are from Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study and Progress in International Reading Literacy.

\(^2\) “Middling” is the reaction by researchers to US results on the Program for Student Assessment as reported in Huff Post Education, March 4, 2013.

maybe even counter to whatever other American ideal one might want to promote be it success, wealth, etc. What Li brings to this discussion is the fact that as statistics show, Asia leads in student success, and her experience both in Asia and in the US as an educator at Harvard and Brown indicates that a more expansive vision of education leads to a different kind of student who does inherently better than Western students. This fact deserves our attention.

Using an expansive vision of education, it is my view that there are three underlying assumptions about education that are commonly accepted by the American public which are the root causes of our stagnation. Those three have to do with what education is, what it is for, and what it requires of us. Whether we wish to blame John Dewey for our now pragmatic approach to education is a subject for the field of education itself. A philosophical critique of such a view would be that Americans make educational decisions on a pragmatic basis as to degree gained versus cost expended. That cost is not only monetary—cost in time and effort are also part of the equation. How much work is required is ever on the minds of today's multi-tasking students who work as well as attend classes, many of whom care for families too. Education is to help one get ahead, to have an advantage over other applicants for a job, and for career advancement. It requires that students work to pass examinations and studies study mostly to that end.

When students view education in this way, then it can lead to some of the recurring problems we see in our students. Students pragmatically chose what to learn based on what they perceive they need to know given their own vision of their future. If one views education solely as a means to future career needs then, what is the need for poetry, for higher math, and for advanced science? We can explain that need time and time again to students, but if their frame of reference is simply to get ahead, then we have a losing battle on our hands. We can even drum in all kinds of knowledge such that students will perform better on the test scores mentioned above, and that practice may produce modest results, but any higher education instructor knows knowledge accumulated that way is short lived. Freshman students do not read at the level necessary to understand the material we are giving them. General statistics are misleading as we all can bear witness.

One bizarre phenomenon that is occurring more and more is that many students make sure they let us know that they are not good at one thing or another. One might say he is not good a good reader, another might say she is taking this class because she is not good at math, and then there are those who say they are poor test takers as if it is an acceptable excuse. The frightening thing is that these are average students. We can agree with them that they have not mastered the skills to do math, or read, or take tests, but we cannot accept their excuses as reasons for doing badly. Students’ poor experiences with these aspects of education in the past are an indication of two things. First, they have not mastered material that the average person can do, and secondly, much to our chagrin they have made it through elementary and secondary education anyway. So obviously they did not apply themselves diligently to obtain those skills and are now hobbled and restricted in what courses and majors they can master at the college level, and college instructors are burdened with the problem of how to present college-level material to students who cannot adequately deal with it. A better view of the need for education might have saved some of them. If a young person sees no need for higher
math, then why work hard to master it? That’s a valid point. However, if one views oneself as an
educated person who knows these things, then there is more impetus to try to work harder and the
point is moot.

The problem of unprepared students is even more acute for instructors in Community Colleges.
Open enrollment means an extraordinary gap in levels of achievement that courses in basic skills can
only modestly begin to address. It will take years of practice before an underachieving student can
begin to catch up to those good and excellent students who chose community colleges because it is cost
effective. The old incentive for lower tier students to work hard so that they can have a career is no
longer a carrot that can bring them home. They are well aware of our economic malaise, and they are
more easily lost because the economic incentive is not strong enough to help them persevere. I have
found that a different stratagem is effective. I simply will not give them an F on their weekly
assignments if they are not up to par. If their work is not passing on the college level, I ask them to redo
it. In my view, putting an “F” on a paper gives the student an excuse. Hence, the phrase, “Well, I’m not
good at this.” To a student who sees no value in an exercise or work, an F can thereby be answered
away and the material not mastered. By requiring students to do their work well, they gain at least
some mastery. Surprisingly, in my experience I have found that they then rarely slack off because they
think they have another chance. Instead, I find that students actually work harder so that they don’t
have to spend the time redoing it. So the phrase, “I’m not good at . . .” is a copout, and educators need
to see it as such. That copout, however, can only be seen as valid within a pragmatic view of education.
It has no validity and can clearly be seen as such within the Asian or philosophical view of education as a
path to a wise way of life where all knowledge has value.

So what to do? It isn’t an easy thing to reeducate the American public to view education for
education’s sake, which is what Li is really suggesting, but it isn’t overwhelmingly difficult either.
Philosophers have lots of experience with this problem since the value of philosophy is not inherently
obvious, as those of you who have taken philosophy are aware. So if you will, we have lots of
experience with rejection. That means we have a good deal of experience in dealing with the value of
knowledge whether useful or arcane and how it can change us. I translate this into discussions of what
it means to be a college educated man or woman hopefully providing an image—an image of an
independent minded, knowledgeable person of integrity who has a responsibility to lead others. I hold
up this model as opposed to those who view themselves as accountants, scientists, and nurses who
simply have value because they are good team players or do their jobs well. Students readily recognize
the difference. They see that it is helpful as well. They see that it gives us more value, not simply as
another working person, but inherent in who we are and it gives each person a certain dignity
independent of school, degree, and job which is exactly what Li has in mind with the life of one who
wishes to be a sage and which as a philosopher I support.

---

4 There is a fairness issue with allowing students another opportunity to do an assignment. I do dock them a few
points in a redo. It would be unfair to students who do their work well and on time to award an equal grade to
students who do not.
One contemporary philosopher of note, Bertrand Russell, suggests that a path to wisdom renders individuals great, “not for the sake of what philosophy investigates, but because the path to knowledge for the sake of knowledge diminishes the “dogmatic assurance which close the mind to speculation.”

Thus, the college educated person truly understands that the process of learning itself renders us wise through the greatness of the questions which we investigate. We are uplifted or not by the kinds of problems we seek to answer for ourselves. A pragmatic mind will remain such occupied with everyday concerns and unaware “that the goods of the mind are at least as important as the goods of the body.”

Difficult times and complex societal problems, as we all know, cannot be solved by people who are preoccupied with everyday concerns. Only the emphasis on the expanded view of education can produce students with the diligence, interest, and mastered skills necessary to lead us in the future. The Asian world understands this. There will be no real progress and no real competition with Asian education, until we as a society do so the same. This is one of the tasks of contemporary philosophers and that is how we view education.

Tristate Best Practices Conference
March 9, 2013

---

6 Ibid