

What Happened To 'A Gentleman and a Scholar'?

Andrew Colgan

In the past, higher education, then small liberal arts colleges, taught the students of the wealthy and aristocracy to hold high public offices, including the first professions of law, medicine, and the priesthood. Today, these institutions have evolved into large university complexes which offer almost exclusively specialist degrees and narrow research.

While it's believed this is a step of modernity beyond the medieval university, is this more accessible higher education providing the kind of education adults need in modern democratic societies where all citizens hold political power, not just a ruling class? In other words, today we create scholars through higher education, but as a result we have created not the 'knowledge'-age, but the 'information'-age, the trivia(l)-age!

The problem is that maintaining modern democracies requires an educated citizenry, since all hold political power through the ballot box. And yet our colleges and universities promote vocationalism – higher education has become the pursuit of a very narrow specialty, disseminating isolated facts and theories rather than the integrated knowledge and wisdom we need today.

But we cannot blame the universities entirely, for they must observe market demands and cater to student desires. This evolution over the last century has indeed opened up higher education to all, which is a positive change, but over this time it has devolved into an exclusively narrow, medieval guild-like training in a specialty in the form of the degree and diploma. We have gained

the benefits of open admissions, but lost the benefits of a more general education which in the past provided the guidance for the few to rule nations. The question is, are these wise educational programs, not just for your young adult children, but for the nation's next generation as a whole?

Of course it must be conceded that as society becomes ever more technological, it is absolutely necessary that skills become more technical, more narrow. The time and intelligence needed to build wagons are far more rudimentary than what is required for rockets. But are the human problems any more removed? Have we decidedly corrected the problem of corruption which plagued and led to the collapse of Ancient Rome? Are we more advanced morally as a civilization than the era of the British Empire?

The good news is that we can be: we can advance socially and politically at the rate we have advanced technologically. The emancipation of education was a great achievement of mankind, opening up education to all races and women, the poor, etc. But we blundered on one still crucial issue – while we opened up the pursuit of vocational interests to any who have the capacity, the kind of wisdom-fostering education historically given to the elites of aristocracies has been neglected, seldom sought or delivered. This kind of education remains, still, the choice of a few.

Can we not foster both gentlemen and scholars? Higher education can provide both the narrow job training to earn one's bread, but also the general education to stimulate a peripheral

vision of life and social issues. This will prevent a pigeon-holed society where everyone has the information to speak of the complexities of their specialities, but lacks the knowledge and wisdom to vote in the next election.

The great fear is to produce a man who can build a nuclear bomb, but lacks a worthwhile opinion on where and when it should be used. Or to produce a woman who can genetically engineer hair colour in a fertilized egg, but cannot decide on the merits or demerits of a government healthcare system. The specialism of today works well on a customer-provider basis, but it doesn't work at all on a citizen-government basis.

Political health needs smart votes from generally educated people, the 'gentlemen,' just as technological health needs the 'scholars' we are in great abundance. It is out of neglect we find ourselves in this situation – we must turn the 'information'-age into the knowledge-age, the wisdom-age. So how can this be done?

Education at all grade levels and the post-secondary level must adhere to what is called the *hierarchy of knowledge*. This is the idea that knowledge has a constructed order to it, and that the acquisition of knowledge must be built from lower-order concepts and surrounded by context, the connections between pieces of information. The first level of knowledge comes from perception when we are young. These perceptions are abstracted to our first concepts, such as of objects. These lower-order concepts are then used to build higher order concepts. For instance, identification of singular objects brings about counting, leading to addition, multiplication, and calculus. Counting also leads to understanding of 'number' in the abstract, which leads to 'variables,' the abstraction of number, which builds the system of algebra. Francis Bacon¹ had an adequate metaphor to illustrate this inductive method in education, arguing we should "be neither like spiders, which spin things out of their own insides, nor like ants, which merely collect, but like bees, which both collect and arrange."

For an example of context, the use of nuclear weapons is part of "geo-political conflict," a great abstraction which must depend on lower-

order concepts, such as warfare, national relations, history, and culture. All abstractions consist of various parts once broken down that can be studied, but must be integrated again to retain the higher concept of interest. Similarly, analyzing the merits of a public healthcare system requires the study of human behaviour and ethics, which can be built through studying concepts in economics, philosophy, psychology and even literature; for wasn't it Dostoyevsky who wrote, "if you give man bread, he will wear chains"?

What should be avoided is an anti-synoptic tunnel-vision that perceives each event in history or each human problem as isolated and to be dealt with pragmatically. Promoting this to policy can only cause myopia and perpetual re-adjustments and, extending the metaphor, a fixing of the eyes to this narrow view. A clairvoyance can be fostered by an education of connections that still *supports* a specialty, achieving the goals of both job training and wisdom. To maintain our civilization, we must expand our general knowledge for a wider view and wiser decision-making, lest our politics devolve to charisma and dollars, not ideas.

What we need is to "rise" the tide that lifts all boats. A supporting general education will also rise the specialized degree, and it will remain dominant – the highest boat – yet it will not be left on a lonely pedestal in the clouds where the ivory tower scholar sits alone, unconnected to and unsupported by anything else. In a wiser society, citizens must not be lonely scholars, but rather choose to proliferate the qualities of *both* a "gentleman and a scholar." In a phrase, while our grasp depends on scholars, our reach, what supports civilizations, depends on "gentlemen."•

References

1. Bertrand Russel, *History of Western Philosophy*, p. 528

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