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Whatever Happened to the 3 R's?

The pace of modern life is leaving education behind

The 3 R's - reading, (w)riting and (a)rithmetic - used to be taken for granted as the foundation of general education. From the earliest age, children were taught the basics, preparing them for the future. But it wasn't all work for the kids. Playtime was not only an enjoyable part of the day: it was also regarded as essential for complementing formal education with hands-on, practical examples of how to apply lessons learned at school, along with the acquisition of necessary social skills. In those times, everything was simpler and rolled along at a much slower, commonsense pace.

We all remember those days and I think most would have to agree that, without the discipline and perseverance of our teachers back then, we would not be as well-educated, successful, or contented in the years to come; but it was not all plain sailing. Scrappy handwriting and spelling mistakes were not tolerated, inadequacies that were put right during detention periods of writing lines over and over. As for maths, memorising the times tables was mandatory. We still found time to play, though; and if homework or the like suffered as a consequence, our educators were quick to rectify the situation.

Then enlightenment happened. The sixties spawned a free-expression approach. It no longer mattered that essays were littered with misspelled words, or that phrases were corrupted by bad grammar and syntax errors. If the content showed imagination, flair and promise, that was enough for the time being. As far as the education system was concerned, once the basics were grasped, refinement would supposedly come naturally somewhere along the way between secondary and tertiary levels. This might just include the art of letter-writing, a very useful, in many cases essential skill; but it too seemed to be regarded as unnecessary. Actually, there is a host of youngsters and adults who can't even address an envelope properly! How sad is that? So, semi-literacy has become grudgingly acceptable; electronic calculators take care of the third R; and the computer revolution ensures that an overwhelming general ignorance is compensated for with a tap or a click.

There was possibly a saving grace. University, it being the higher seat of learning, was regarded as the boot-strap method for addressing the failings of primary and secondary education. On the assumption that sufficient knowledge had been ingested by graduation day, high-school leavers should have been well prepared for the transition to the next step in their education. Of course, that did depend on how much information they managed to retain from the previous ten-or-so years they had spent at school; but doing what – learning, or just being allowed to stuff around? Now like then, by the time many of this pseudo-intelligentsia sets foot on the hallowed turf, few have read a book from cover to cover, except for the odd magazine or video-game how-to manual; and nearly all are expecting that what they are about to receive will be handed to them on a plate.

Suddenly it is discovered that there are no notes on a blackboard to copy down; and lecturers guide rather than teach. Undergraduates actually have to start learning themselves; which means hours of research and reading, having to dedicate more of their own "free" time in order to keep up than the few hours spent attending lectures and tutorials. Their inadequate education to date has left them behind the eight ball. For many it is too much. Some will defer, intending to return later when they feel better able to cope; a higher proportion will simply drop out for good.

Those who do have the staying-power presumably hope to gain greater knowledge overall; but University life is so complex and intense that, rather than actually reading, skimming and scanning reams of texts

and reports seems the only way to cope with the volume. As a result, only the smart or lucky few are destined to graduate fully prepared for whatever profession they have elected to undertake. Certainly, each will have that important piece of paper quoting the prized letters after their name; but all this really proves is that they have skimmed and scanned just enough at college to pass tests and exams. It is in no way a true endorsement of their competence to perform adequately in a work environment.

Employers know this only too well. They want the best, but they aren't going to pay big bucks for someone with a degree who can't do the job. If it reaches a point where there is a scarcity of suitably educated applicants for vacant positions, all thanks to the don't-worry-just-sweep-it-under-the-carpet attitude, they'll look elsewhere, possibly overseas. Such situations are all-too common and they reflect poorly on the country in general and the education of its people specifically.

Maybe I'm being over-critical, because education standards are claimed to be far higher than they have ever been. I seriously doubt that. The content may well be available; but when students are forced to skip through it at break-neck speed, only the self-motivated will be likely to retain enough to make it count. The culprit is pace. Too far too fast is a recipe for incompetence and growing ignorance.

The solution seems plainly obvious – slow down. Don't push primary students to learn high-school subjects and concepts before they have even graduated. Surely their final year should be devoted to reviewing what they have learned to date. If they are unable to demonstrate an acceptable level of understanding to that point, they are going to be all at sea when they move to high school. By adapting the curriculum to progress at a slower rate throughout both primary and secondary schools, hopefully those eventually entering University should be better prepared.

They are still likely, however, to receive a shock because Uni is nothing like school. Methods and expectations are different; standards are considerably higher; and the focus on correctness in academic writing, specific formatting and time management will be totally alien to them. What they really need is the same 6-month course that mature-age students have to complete before they can begin their university studies. In fact, older students are often better prepared because they have been out in the real world learning life and other skills that the cotton-wool environment of school doesn't teach. I believe every prospective student, young or old, high-school graduate or not, should undertake a bridging course before starting into their first semester at college. In the scheme of things, 6 months added to a 3 or 4 year degree is nothing compared to the stress which will eventuate by jumping in too soon.

And I think the same advice we used to give our kids when they were young is pertinent for all: "We don't care if you want to be beach-bums, but be educated beach-bums. Then, when you've had enough of sand in your hamburgers, you'll have something to fall back on in the real world."

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