

What is An Education and Who Are the Educated?

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A few weeks ago I was informally asked by parents of three bright high school students: "What advantage will my children gain from a college education?" These parents seriously questioned whether a college education was worth the time, effort, and money. Fortunately, in my mind, they sought other opinions. I believe that all students and teachers should form for themselves answers to the questions: what is an education and who do we reasonably decide is an educated person? I offer for judgment and discussion some personal answers to these questions. These views determined, in great part, my own learning and influence my present teaching.

An education does not determine one's worth; but it offers the educated opportunities to make more informed choices for the betterment of their lives and the lives of others. Truly educated people are the ones who avail themselves of opportunities that present themselves. Formal school education is valuable; however, it is only one part of the total learning package. Schools provide learning opportunities that are methodical, time constrained, other initiated and defined, and compartmentalized. Learning also originates from our experiences; observations; and unstructured, self defined and motivated interests. The educated person knows how and when to apply what is learned.

An educated person has learned that there are a variety of acceptable and successful ways ends can be accomplished; that "different" is neither good nor evil, but indicates that options

are present; that change is neither necessary nor to be feared in all cases, but is an option some choose. Educated people are tolerant of each other, others' ideas, their ways of doing things and expressing themselves, their customs and rituals, and their appearance. With tolerance comes understanding, sharing, and peace.

An education is not the raw accumulation of facts, course credits, books read, and years attending school; an education is being conscious that there are repositories of knowledge stored in peoples' minds, libraries, computer data bases, and in nature that can be tapped only if the keys to these repositories are known. Access to such knowledge is accomplished through listening to others, learning how to retrieve accumulated library and data base information, and acquiring abilities to interpret, express, and judge, our own experiences, observations, and reactions to events, processes and natural occurrences. In addition to retrieval, recognizing and putting to use relationships between segments of knowledge is typical of the educated person.

Educated people understand the power of naming: people, phenomena, conditions, states, problems, and solutions; they note the consequences and potency of framing: determining focus, scope, setting, frame of reference, and context around topics of interest; they also are aware of the value and utility of sequencing and prioritizing their own wants, needs, entitlements, activities, and the world around them; and they recognize and

desire judgments that are: based on clearly stated criteria, formed logically, and supported by sound evidence. Those who are educated welcome their ideas and actions being questioned, challenged, analyzed, and judged; they accept that others may disagree, may have alternative views, and may wish to negotiate compromises. Educated people seek advice and welcome suggestions from others. An open, questioning mind suggests an educated mind.

People who learn from the past, who remember the errors and the successes of our forbearers, and who can connect the past, the present, and the future show that they are educated. Those who learn the techniques, varieties, and uses of written, spoken, and symbolic idea exchange demonstrate their education. Educated people do not diminish any realm of interest and they acquire whatever insights they can regardless of likely or immediate extrinsic reward. Being better informed; being aware of what others have done and are doing; being able to appreciate nature, the arts, science and technology, economic, political, and social issues, problems, solutions, and arguments; being able and willing to participate in our own welfare rather than depending on others are all results of being well educated.

A great deal of the learning discussed so far is accomplished out of class -- in informal discussions, in non-school social, political, religious, and economic activity. Classroom activity introduces ideas that then must be put to practice by educated students.

Preparing for a job is a desired goal, and schooling can assist in that goal; however, training should not be the primary goal of our schools. If graduates can sell the skills suggested above and demonstrate: a willingness to continue learning, adaptability, and competent social skills, they will be highly marketable.

I strongly advocated a college education for these parents' children and I perceived a mixed response at the end of my argument. One parent reacted: "I wish I had been told this when it was time for me to decide whether to attend college;" another parent simply remarked: "Those are interesting ideas;" and the third parent commented: "All those nice ideas won't put bread on my kid's table." What do you think?