

Revisiting Public Education
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There is too much talk about reforming our education system and too little discussion of what education is, and its particular purpose in a democracy.

In antiquity, only the children of the ruling class received an education, generally through a well-known teacher. We first encounter discussions of how to teach in the ancient Greek accounts written by Plato of how his own teacher, Socrates, taught. This was an unusual method at the time, and is still too rare even today. Socrates asked questions of his students. He laboriously led them through a process of telling him what they believed to be true, and then defend this truth through a process of questions that inevitably challenged them. The smart students learned; the dull were frustrated to have their biases challenged and left.

Today's graduate school seminars stem from this method of learning. What is happening there is the culmination of an education that provided the best facts known at the time, and then questioning them critically. Critical thinking is the difference between intelligent thought process and "belief" in untested information (conspiracy theories as an example).

The Romans adopted the Greek system of education, even to having Greek tutors for the children of the Roman elite. The rest of the population remained largely uneducated, with the exception of some learning how to read, write, and calculate numbers.

In Medieval Europe, few, even among the elite, were literate. Christianity's monks were the guardians of learning, much of it in reading religious texts in Latin, and over time, in the beginnings of pragmatic instruction: draining swamps, making cheese and wine, beginnings of medical information, and assisting in drafting secular law.

Over time, the ruling class sent their sons to be educated by clerics. Then universities were opened (12th century), that offered religious and secular educations, based on ancient Roman texts. In the later Middle Ages, convents opened for women, who were not only literate, but able to educate the daughters of the elites.

The notion that a society should be completely literate began with the ancient Jews, who mandated that every male upon reaching 13 should be examined for literacy (Bar Mitzvah). They were the first society to have complete male literacy.

Protestantism, particularly British, benefitted from two new sources of knowledge beyond Roman: Greek and Hebrew (used for translating biblical texts). Queen Elizabeth I (16th century) was the first to see the benefit of universal male education. She mandated that every village in England have a school and literate school master to educate every boy capable of learning.

The queen's agents (spy network) visited each town and identified particularly bright boys to go to the university, becoming the first professionals (doctors, lawyers, professors) with no connection to the ruling nobility. This launched the powerful middle class that was to become the ultimate underpinning of participatory governance.

The American colonies inherited the British system of universal education, and benefitted from the Enlightenment movement which separated faith (religious) from reason (Socratic method). When the colonies created the United States, one issue came back again and again among our founders: that the citizens and officials in a participatory government must be honorable and educated. Democracy depends upon this most elusive element: good character of the participants. The Greeks knew this, as did the Romans, but both lost their civilizations when good character became scarce.

When I was a schoolgirl (decades ago), our teachers stressed "good citizenship." We were to practice honesty, diligence, and respect for others. We learned very young how to vote as a class, and how to accept winning or losing with grace and kindness. I understand that these attributes are less discussed in today's public schools. This value seems to have gone out of fashion, being replaced by winning (good grades, social success), rather than decency.

In today's reformist mood, "good citizenship" is being resurrected. Good citizens must have basic knowledge of civics and our own country's history. This is basic education for all citizens, those going into trades and crafts, and those going to

the university. We must be Americans, all in this venture together.

684 words

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