

Rethinking Education (1)  
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Human beings are the only species that deliberately passes knowledge and remembrance of events to its young. Even the most primitive of our ancestors, once they developed language, used ritual and stories to bring the young into the collective memory of the group. Once writing was invented, history and learning became systematized. History was the first human educational discipline.

In some early civilizations, numbers and counting developed earlier than written words. Trading, which is as old as our oldest ancestors, depended on counting. Religion, our first efforts at contemplating the world's mysteries, also depended on counting, assigning significance to periods of time: days, weeks, months, years, and eventually ages. Women may have been the first to count, associating the phases of the moon with their own monthly cycles, including making the association between sex and childbirth, a secret they kept from men for quite a long time.

The transmission of knowledge is what we call education, an institution that has changed as human culture matured. Ancient Egypt formalized an educational system run by priests, who taught young men reading and writing, theology, history (the Humanities) and such practical subjects as science, medicine, math, and geometry. Their students were to become the intellectuals, priests and nobility, who ran society. Vocational skills (architecture, engineering, and sculpture, were taught by practitioners, the system of apprenticeship rather than formal education.

Equally ancient, Mesopotamia, had a similar system. Formal education was to train scribes and priests: reading, writing, religion, law, medicine, and astrology. Practical skills, such as engineering irrigation systems or medicine, followed the system of apprentice system. One learned from those who practices the discipline.

Ancient China had a different system, without a priesthood. It was secular, and emphasized moral character and duty toward people and the state. Education was regarded as the process of individual development from within. Later, however, specialized education evolved a system for educating officials, civil servants, who were responsible for administering Chinese society. This was the first in which exams gave opportunities to the mentally gifted, not just to those of aristocratic or powerful lineage.

In ancient Greece and later in Rome, education was reserved for the ruling classes and religious authorities, much of it transmitted by specialized teachers who attracted followers to learn from them. This is probably the origin of our later school systems in which trained teachers conveyed all the cultural necessities of a society to the young, almost exclusively male. Practical skills continued to be a system of practitioners and apprentices, who learned by doing.

We Americans owe our educational system to European models: religious authorities leading and developing the university system designed to educate other clerics and aristocratic future leaders. Practical subjects were still in the practitioner/apprentice system. Even Abraham Lincoln learned law from reading law books and studying with a practicing lawyer.

The idea of universal education began with Queen Elizabeth I, the 16th century last Tudor ruler, who mandated public education for every town and village in England with the aim of creating a common culture and those talented enough to provide a civil service. This system lifted England's education out of the nobility preserve, beginning the process of democratization, with aspirations of merit and honor replacing class and privilege. Our own young country developed a two-track system: private elite schools and a university system for the privileged future authorities, and a public school system that taught basic skills, common cultural history (secular and religious), and preparation for honorable citizenship. Practical skills (medicine, engineering, and practical law) remained for a long time in the practitioner/apprenticeship mode, although gradually absorbed into the university system.

Until the recent Pandemic locked down the school system, we continued to support a public school system that suffered under the burden of one-size-fits-all. One's zip-code often determined the quality of the schooling, a growing dilemma for promulgating a democracy that unified and encouraged citizenship.

Unifying subjects such as civics, in which children learned how our republic worked, vanished. Open warfare between science and religion, resulted in rival systems of

reality: facts and "alternate facts" (conspiracy theories or lies). Education was failing.

Next time: a new model of education

683 words

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