



In Praise of Useless Education

Classical Christian education is growing these days, but it's still a tough-sell. Twenty-first-century Americans lead busy lives. They have a lot to do. They can't afford to waste time. They don't have extra time to spend long hours reading books, doing math problems or memorizing lengthy passages of antiquated literature. They are struggling just to "keep up." The demands of modern life are forcing many Americans to assess how they invest both time and money. Many want to know, what 'return on investment' will be realized by their educational choices.

It hardly needs to be said that the national debate on education has been framed in recent years by shallow, consumerist assumptions about the goals of education. Take, for example, the findings of a recent journal article, which proclaims that "The conclusions of this emerging body of research are clear: Education quality, as measured by test scores, is positively related to the earnings of individuals, national productivity, and economic growth."¹ From such findings, it seems obvious to posit the following: Higher test scores yield higher productivity. Naturally enough, already busy, but conscientious parents are rushing to find the schools that will produce the best test scores. We'll call this *Educational Utilitarianism*. Like moral utilitarianism, educational utilitarianism holds that the best educational choices are those which are useful in producing the most desirable results (Many professional educators call these "outcomes"). The folly of educational utilitarianism is, of course, its failure to recognize purposes greater than those that can be measured in material or temporal goods.

Happily, Christians often recognize such folly for what it is. They know that their children's education is not just another consumer decision. They know that schooling is more than a means to a good job and a comfortable retirement. Most faithful Christian parents seek an education for their children that will support—or, at least, not subvert—their ultimate goal, to raise faithful followers of Jesus Christ. But even so, it seems that murky thinking about the purpose of education abounds within the church. A form of educational utilitarianism pervades the Christian community.

In our quest to raise godly children, we are prone to see education as merely a tool, a means to a temporal end, but not the ultimate end. For many, schooling belongs to the secular, not the spiritual realm. Like the house we live in or the car we drive, the school we send our children to is an earthly concern, of some importance, but hardly comparable to eternal matters such as spiritual growth. Pious as this sounds, such thinking can easily lead to a 'Christianized' educational utilitarianism. For example, a well-meaning parent might opine that: "My child should receive a good education that will prepare him for a good job, so that he can provide for his family and be able to give time and money to Christian ministry." Believing that many schools in our secular society are offering much that is contrary to Christian belief and much else that is simply useless, such parents search for schools that reinforce Christian values (where applicable) and that do not fill their children's minds with useless and vain knowledge. For them, schooling is a tool, useful for accomplishing an important task. The best school must, therefore, be selected on the basis of its utility and efficiency in accomplishing its goal. The lure of measuring educational efficiency in terms of quantifiable results, such as test scores, seems attractive in this view as well.

But what then, really, is the end (or purpose) of education? Although it may seem trite or even quaint to say it, the end of education is knowledge. We learn in order to know. Okay, that seems obvious, and, perhaps, not very helpful. Isn't it more important to know *what* it is that we should know? Yes, but knowledge is required to know how to evaluate the objects of knowledge. Knowledge is, per se, its own end, that is, it need not be useful for something else. We could call an education understood in this non-utilitarian way a

¹ Eric A. Hanushek, "Lost Opportunity," *Education Next* (2003), <http://www.educationnext.org/20032/84.html>.

“useless education.” Classical educators have another name, calling it “liberal education.” Liberal, used in this sense, by the way, refers not to a political or theological ideology, but to the *libertas* (freedom) that is found in knowing things that are not tied to specific uses, things such as truth, beauty and justice.

Sophistry? Maybe, but consider first that our ability to know is a fundamental attribute of our humanity; it is, in fact, one of the ways in which we bear that image of the omniscient God. God himself calls us to grow in knowledge, just as we are to grow in wisdom, righteousness and love. We know from the scriptures that wisdom, another communicable attribute of God, is closely allied to knowledge. Doesn’t the teacher in the book of Proverbs incessantly drill us with the admonition to “Get Wisdom”? John Calvin began his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* by asserting that wisdom can be divided into two basic forms, knowledge of man and knowledge of God. Surely, growing in knowledge of God and his creation is a noble and desirable activity, even if not directly useful. Which brings up the question of use again: Shouldn’t usefulness be measured against our ultimate calling to glorify and enjoy God forever? That, of course, is the ultimate answer to why we educate our children.

Seen in this light, a Classical Christian education is both freeing and demanding. It is freeing because it finds rewards and delight in knowing many things. The classically educated child laughs when he recognizes a Latin-based pun, marvels at the glorious intricacies of nature, grimaces at the sloppy logic of a news reporter and recognizes the providence of God in working out his purposes in the history of the world. Grades and test scores are certainly NOT the rewards that knowledge seeks; it seeks things far higher and can be satisfied even when the grade is a “C.” It is demanding because it is an unending task and there is so much to learn and so little time. Obviously, if education is not simply a means to an earthly end, but a calling from God, then we must apply ourselves with all our might to excel in it. But it doesn’t ‘happen’ quickly. Learning requires daily discipline. Reading, memorizing, composing and solving equations are activities that require time and concentration. For some these abilities come more quickly than for others. Parents must recognize, furthermore, that although they send their children to school, they too must seek to grow in knowledge. As we all know, assisting our children with their homework, leading family devotions, discussing worthwhile subjects at the dinner table with our family are excellent ways to learn together. The ideal Christian Classical home sees education, not as something that happens just at school, but as an ongoing part of family life. Homework should not be understood as an intrusion into an otherwise busy schedule; it should be a natural, integral and welcome part of our daily discipline. To pursue this ideal, parents must lead. If they demonstrate a love of learning by daily pursuing knowledge, their children are likely to follow.

“Does a liberal education offer ANY rewards beyond knowing for knowledge’s sake?” someone might brazenly ask (still asking themselves whether such pursuits are worth their time). History offers some lessons in this regard. Consider the great pursuers of knowledge such as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine and Edwards. Are they not honored still for their knowledge? Have they had any influence on the course of human events? Consider certain jobs and their requirements. Would it not be desirable—maybe even useful—for the rulers of nations to be filled with knowledge? The dictum that “knowledge is power” is not without merit. A liberal education might be more useful than it first appears.

Here is a principle which has been largely abandoned by modern evangelical Christianity: By rejecting the “useless knowledge” of liberal education, we have failed to see how really useful it is. The church still carries the baggage of its 20th-century anti-intellectualism. Consequently, many of the great educational institutions, the purveyors of knowledge in contemporary society are in the hands of those hostile to Christian truth. Might it be “useful” for the Christian community to reclaim its leadership in education? As Christians we are to seek not the power, honor and wealth that often come from knowledge; we are to seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness. But this too involves the use of knowledge. Scripture commands us to “reason together,” to “renew our minds,” and “to know the truth.” Isn’t knowledge required to “demolish the arguments of the godless” or to “subdue and have dominion over the earth”? Maybe the pursuit of knowledge as the end goal of our education is worth our time after all.

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