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Defining the Purpose of Education

By Emily Steinbacher

For something that plays such a major role in our lives, education remains an enigma for most. Opinions on what's the most effective method, what should be emphasized, and how the educational structure functions as a whole varies from person to person. To be perfectly honest, it's nearly impossible to find someone who shares your own views on this controversial topic perfectly. One facet of this controversy is the question, is education's effectiveness determined by the kind of job it earns and the financial success that follows, or are there things more important than the outward success an education provides? Bob Compton, producer of the documentary film *2 Million Minutes* (2007), would argue that education is not successful unless it allows the student to be competitive in the areas of math and science, however ancient Greek philosopher Plato would disagree, contending that there are other beneficial skills and values to be gained from an education.

The film *2 Million Minutes* follows six high school seniors from three countries, the US, China and India, in an attempt to demonstrate the differences in the educational systems, as well as the goals and priorities of the teenagers that were profiled. It's rather easy to grasp that this film

is intended to be a wake-up call of sorts for the traditional American educational system. One of the main points is that the world is becoming more and more global, or in other words, that the competition between people from an increasing number of countries for the same top jobs is growing exponentially. Where the US was once the undisputed leader of the world with respect to math and science related professions, nations such as China and India are quickly catching up. “The post WWII world of American domination is a world we will never see again,” according to Richard Freeman, an economist at Harvard University, who speaks in the film.

This isn't to say that we as Americans should feel threatened, or upset that more people from other countries are bettering their educations and preparing to improve their lives with their hard work. But rather that it's simple reality that the world “suddenly became a very small place” as Vivek Wadhwa, an executive in residence at Duke University says in the film. Employers aren't just looking within the US for smart, talented people anymore; after all, brains can come from anywhere. Unless American students begin to acknowledge the reality of this situation, and as a result take their educations more seriously, they may find themselves losing out to other people who have put more emphasis on the importance of math and the sciences.

In Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," we find another take on education, one that is perhaps a little broader than that of Compton. Plato likens the human condition to that of being in a cave. In some way or another, all of us find ourselves in a cave; in the dark and ignorant about something. We rely on shadows of reality, the hearsay, rather than experiencing it for ourselves. It takes the harsh brightness of the sun to enlighten us, open our eyes to see the reality outside. Plato would probably agree with Compton in that American students are in a cave about the situation of the global competitiveness of the world right now. In fact, he would probably understand that *2 Million Minutes* is nothing more than Compton's attempt to bring Americans out of their cave so they can take the necessary action to remain competitive. While Compton would acknowledge only that American students are suffering from a lack of enlightenment, in my opinion Plato would also see how the Chinese and Indian students are still in their own caves.

Through his allegory, Plato values the sun, enlightenment, that experience of the reality behind the shadows. He also uses the example of a freed prisoner attempting to go back and relate his experiences outside the cave to those who are still imprisoned to demonstrate that there are some experiences that you cannot relate to unless you've done the same thing. Perhaps this is the cave of the Chinese and Indian students; they may be richer than American students with respect to

book knowledge, but Americans may still have an advantage when it comes to that vital hands-on experience.

In my own personal views of this educational dilemma, I'd have to say that I agree with both Plato and Compton. There's no debating *Two Million Minutes* and its assertion that the world has become a more even playing field, and that the competition to find good jobs after college graduation is even more intense with countries like India and China entering the game as major players. In all honesty, the statistics are daunting; the fact that "nearly forty percent of US high school students don't take any science class more challenging than general biology," and also that "fifty five percent don't take any math courses beyond two years of algebra and one of geometry" make it pretty clear that the majority of American students are not as focused on math and the sciences as the Chinese and Indian students. The American students that were profiled in the film, Neil in particular, simply have more going on in their lives than their counterparts in India and China; Neil has a part-time job, is senior class president, and the graphics editor of his school newspaper. From athletics to jobs and all kinds of different activities, our priorities are much different, be that for better or worse.

The American system of education is far from perfect, and you'd be hard pressed to find anyone who would argue the contrary. However, Plato's emphasis on the value of experience suggests to me that

Americans may yet have a slight advantage over others in at least this one category. The fact that American students *are* so much more involved, well rounded, diverse, or however you want to phrase it, provides them with more of that valuable experience than what can be learned just in the classroom. A part-time job for example is perfect practice; even though it may not be challenging mentally, or even close to what you want to spend the rest of your life doing, there are basic teamwork skills that can be learned, not to mention leadership and integrity. Clubs and athletics are no different in that they all provide a more hands on, real life type of experience that can't be taught. What would happen if the smartest engineer, graduated top of his class and is perfect on paper got into a situation where he had to work with others and couldn't communicate and cooperate as a member of the team because of his lack of experience in such situations? There comes a point where book knowledge only goes so far, and experience has to fill the void.

Adrienne Rich's take on education is perhaps the most fundamental, and in my opinion important element to remember when it comes to this topic. In her essay "Claiming an Education," she argues that education entails being responsible for oneself—not just for women, but for all students; clear thinking, active discussion, and the intellectual and imaginative capacity to be persuaded that new ideas could be true. "The first thing I want to say to you who are students, is that you cannot

afford to think of being here to *receive* an education; you will do much better to think of yourselves as being here to *claim one*" (pg. 37). This lack of inspiration and motivation that Rich is commenting on can be seen in the American students rather obviously. For example, Neil is a National Merit semi-finalist, has a full ride to Purdue, and admits that school hasn't ever been much of a challenge to him. Brittany is in the top three percent of her class, admits that her main interests are social and thinks college is more about learning to balance fun with academics than preparing for a career. Both of these American students are arguably as successful as the Chinese and Indian students. All of them get accepted into good schools, and into programs that will allow them to pursue careers in the fields they wanted, despite how much harder the Chinese and Indian students worked, and how much more focused they were. Perhaps the universities aren't really on the same level as they appear, or perhaps the Chinese and Indian students are still ahead of the American students in some way; to me these arguments are not the point.

Adrienne Rich would look at all students and ask one question: so what?

"Responsibility to yourself means that you don't fall for shallow and easy solutions-predigested books and ideas, weekend encounters guaranteed to change your life, taking 'gut' courses instead of ones you know will challenge you, bluffing at school and life instead of doing solid work . . ." (pg. 38). Education for me is about finding something that you can own, feel a real passion for, and devote all your energy into

mastering. In the case of the Chinese and Indian students, what good does it do to learn all the math and science possible if your real passion is to be a singer, or a soccer player like Rohit Sridharan, from *Two Million Minutes*? And for American students, how can you take pride in your academic accomplishments if you know that you cheated yourself by taking classes that weren't challenging, or that you didn't do the kind of work you were capable of?

This to me is the basics of education, the ideal that we're all striving to achieve. It's about finding a way to get students to put their best into their academic performance, but not so much that they don't have a life outside of schoolwork, because there are things of value that come from outside class experiences. It's about teaching students that they have to find something they're passionate about, rather than just choosing a profession based on the predicted growth in that area or the base salary per year. This to me is the wake-up call all students need, the cave that we're all stumbling our way out of. Perhaps that's the real issue of education; maybe our ideals are too lofty to be met corporately. Motivation, inspiration, determination it may be are all things that simply can't be taught or learned. You can only push a student so far after all. The rest has to come from within the individual.