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A Lesson on English

EDUCATION FOR LIFE

By Sara Tusek

“Education” is an English word borrowed from Latin (ex- "out" + ducere "to lead"). Its *denotation* (literal meaning,) is quite straightforward; it's related to such words as “duct” and “viaduct” which describe pathways on which something is led out of one place to another place.

Education can be thought of, in this regard, as a process that starts at a certain point and ends up at a different point—it's a journey or transition. Since education has a generally positive *connotation* (emotional and cultural meaning), the journey is one that leads to improvement; the transition is from a not-so-perfect state to a better one.

No matter whether you look at the denotation or the connotation, the word “education” refers to a methodology of change. An educational practice is a procedure that causes whatever it affects to be transformed from one state of being into another.

EDUCATION IS UNAVOIDABLE

According to this reasoning, education (at least informal education) is an inevitable part of life. Informal education is what a child gets from his or her surroundings: the people, places and ideas that are part of daily life. Another word for this education is socialization.

Then there's formal education, which is more deliberate. Formal education usually follows a curriculum of study which is struc-

tured by both the philosophy of the educational institution and the desired outcome of the education.

For example, Western medical schools, a type of formal education, are based on the Hippocratic oath, which stresses the obligation of the physician not to harm the patient. The curriculum is geared to produce physicians who will fit into the existing medical system and be successful within its strictures.



Seen this way, education is by nature conservative rather than innovative. Formal education intentionally shapes students to think and act appropriately within the institutions which already exist. This is also true of informal education, in that children are socialized to be part of the society in which they're raised. In formal or informal education, the successful student is one who can function well within his or her established milieu; in most cases, no provision is made that would allow the student to decide to do things differently.

EDUCATION VS. TRAINING

Much of what is called education can better be described as “training.” In training, a behavior is introduced and reinforced by either a positive reward (a cookie, a dog treat, a gold star, money) or a negative penalty (loss of a privilege, a demerit, public humiliation). The key concept of training is to repeat the training (behavior and reinforcement) until the new behavior is habitual. Both animals and people can be trained; the trainer simply needs to know what reinforcement will be most effective in each case.

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Some educators make a distinction between training and education, stressing that training is more a matter of obedience and relinquishment of the will, while education is more about using one's own thought process and analytical skills in order to comprehend new information, new paradigms and new ways of doing things. Training involves rote memorization and automatic reactions, while education involves taking a fresh look at a situation and mastering it through one's intellectual abilities.

Probably this distinction between training and education has some merit, but not as much as educators would like to believe. Both informal and formal educational practices tend to focus on using knowledge and methods that are time-tested, rather than pioneering. Education is not so very different from training in that both means of changing behaviors, attitudes and perspectives are based on dealing with the world as it exists at the moment, not the world which is to come.

EDUCATION FOR THE FUTURE

It would appear that education, both the informal socialization that all people get "for free" as they live in a particular society, and the formal procedure of studying a curriculum and becoming qualified as a practitioner of what has been studied, is not equipped to help people deal with any situation except that which already prevails.

By the time something is learned, it has probably already changed. The circumstances that surround a supposition, strategy or body of knowledge are in constant flux: not only are the circumstances themselves changing due to entropy or evolution, our understanding of them is also changing. Imagine that you were a medieval peasant, taught that the universe revolves around the earth. What would you think if you were to hear that the earth actually revolves around the sun? Your education would scarcely prepare you for such an outrageous idea!

EDUCATION FOR LIFE

Then what does the phrase "education for life" mean? If both education and training are based on instilling worldviews, successful tac-

tics and information that have proven effective in the past, then how can education possibly be relevant for the unknown future? How can one's education, based on the past, be useful in dealing with the problems and opportunities that the future will present?

The answer is simple. Real education, true education, can never be

based on what is already known. Any "back-to-the-basics" approach to education that emphasizes drills, memorization, and standardization of response is simply training, or even indoctrination.

This kind of education is actually anti-education: by allowing and even encouraging students to believe that what they are learning can be stored as lifelong knowledge, and that their ways of managing their environment are correct and adequate, the educator is contributing to the eventual failure of the student. As the inevitable, inescapable changes of life come, the student armed only with soon-outdated stratagems will be sadly bewildered. His or her view of the world will be challenged, and the student won't have the necessary flexibility to devise new ways to understand the world.

True education instills, first of all, humility: "I know that I do not know." The arrogance associated with many types of formal education prevents the student from developing the proper respect for the complexities of life. By imagining that education can ever be comprehensive enough to cover all the exigencies of the future, the student is robbed of the sense of wonder that inspires all new discoveries. He or she falls too easily into the sin of pride, believing that education is a one-time event, when in reality education never ends.

Education is life-long, whether we like it or not. True education prepares the mind to adapt to change and to receive new ideas with equanimity, not hostility. Education for life leads us out of ignorance into the freedom to embrace and correctly value what is new, while retaining what is relevant and ageless.



Sara and Jarda Tusek with Klaus

"A Lesson on English" is a series of short lessons created for people who want to become fluent in conversational English. The lessons are practical and useful for students learning English in a traditional classroom setting or on their own.