

Leaders to Follow



Volume 16, #4

April 2007

International Leadership Institute: Providing Leadership Development Services and Programs in the US and Europe since 1985

Education or Plastics Revisited by Sara Tusek

22 years ago

In the Fall of 1985, *Careers* newsletter of St. Lawrence University published an article called "Education or Plastics?"

Written by Jarda Tusek when he was the

Director of the Office of Career Services at St. Lawrence, the article referred to the famous line in the Dustin Hoffman film, "The Graduate," in which a middle-aged man gives Dustin, the fresh young college grad, a career tip: *the future is in plastics.*

We thought the title of the article

was hilarious. Who, we wondered, would be so foolish as to suggest that 4 years of liberal-arts education at a fine private university could find its fulfillment in a career in something so mundane as plastics?

The purpose of a liberal arts education is, we believed, to prepare one for life.

Surely a career selling plastic items was the antithesis of a noble education in the fine arts, social and natural sciences and higher mathematics.

The aim of education

Moreover, the aim of all education is to provide the critical thinking and decision-making skills needed for life in an increasingly complex and fast-moving world.



Photo, The University of the South, courtesy Spencer Pitman, '10

Surely to choose a career in plastics (an insulting term applied to artificial and often useless people and objects) would make a mockery of the intense effort by students and professors to equip the mind for sophisticated thinking and the creation of lovely

ideas and things.

Education is not a mere filling of the brain with technical information (about, say, plastics) that is often obsolete by the time it's in print. Education is instead a type of calisthenics of the brain, stretching it with new concepts and pushing it to its limits with hard work and the constant stress of time: the quarter, the semester, and the year all hang threateningly over the heads of students and professors alike, forcing the brain to keep up the

heavy work of thinking even when it would rather take a rest.

The art of education

Education, then, is more than plastics. It's more than memorizing some facts, taking a test, and moving on to the next facts. Facts are perilously short-lived in an information-based society where the doors of knowledge have been flung open by the ease of access to all kinds of once-protected information through the world wide web, the computer data-base, the emailed newsletter with hot stock tips, and all the (often) unasked-for information flooding into every home and workplace in the United States.

We are drowning in information, trying to separate the important from the ephemeral. Getting knowledge is not the aim of education; getting and using the correct, appropriate knowledge at the critical moment is a skill learned through education.

If we agree that critical thinking skills are important, then how can a teacher "teach" thinking skills?

Here are three ways:

1. *Question everything.* The Socratic teaching method meets every question with another question. Every so-called fact is examined from many angles, seeking its weakness or bias.
2. *Challenge all assumptions.* Simply ask, "Why?" about every statement made as a basis for an argument. Can you imagine an instance in which this statement is not true, or is inadequate to explain the full truth? Then the statement needs revision.
3. *Model critical thinking.* Watch your tongue!



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Unsupported generalizations, unwarranted assumptions and other coercive uses of language bully the listener into agreement, and short-circuit critical thinking. Every concept, idea, word and expression must be brought under the microscope of unbiased, unsentimental thought and examined for its truthfulness, universality and usefulness.

Can this type of education work?

Twenty-two years ago, Jarda and I scoffed at the idea that the aim of education was preparing a student for a future in plastics. We were convinced that an increasingly interconnected world demanded a radical change in the methods and goals of education. We put our theories into practice in our business.

In our own executive education and English language immersion programs, which we've run since 1987, we stress active learning through internships, university seminars, roundtable discussions among peers, travel-and-learn curricula and a steady emphasis on the practical side of education. Our students learn critical thinking skills not from a book, but from living in a foreign culture where even the tiniest interaction involves clashing values and widely-differing life experiences that have to be reconciled. They learn decision-making skills by living in foreign lands, spending their own money on the necessities of life and choosing the wisest ways to purchase what they want and need.

We believe that the results speak for themselves, in that our program participants have demonstrated the acquisition of the necessary critical thinking and decision-making skills by doing business with American firms, making lasting friendships with American host families,

studying in American universities and marrying Americans. It's been fun to see how people respond to the active learning we offer in our educational programs.

Does everybody do education this way?

The short answer is "no." Much of the American education system is stuck in a paradigm that's about a hundred years old. Based on strict vertical lines of authority, with no provision for feedback from those at the bottom and all power vested at the apex, this model is one of control rather than the freedom necessary to develop independent thinking skills.

Frederick Taylor is a hero to those interested in the hierarchical approach to organizing human activities in a productive, efficient manner. His *Principles of Scientific Management*, put into practice in the first decade of the 20th century, provide an easy-to-implement model for top-down, authoritarian organization:

"The work of every workman is fully planned out by the management at least one day in advance, and each man receives in most cases complete written instructions, describing in detail the task which he is to accomplish, as well as the means to be used in doing the work . . . This task specifies not only what is to be done, but how it is to be done and the exact time allowed for doing it . Scientific management consists very largely in preparing for and carrying out these tasks."

For workman substitute "student;" for management, read "teacher;" for task read "test," and you have a perfect picture of the traditional way of doing education. Even one hundred years later, most schools are still organized in a mechanical (machine-like) way, as if school

were a factory, with proscribed periods of time delineated by bells, unvarying routines of classes and teachers, periodic check-ups to see if learning is proceeding according to schedule, strict adherence to rules and respect for authority, and assessment of success based on products (graduates with high test scores and GPA's) rather than process (learning to think critically, to make wise decisions, and to develop leadership and communication skills while continually learning.)

Maybe plastics is the answer

It would be much easier if plastics were enough after all—if education could be wrapped up into a neat bundle and handed to the next generation. Real education is far too messy, too random, and too wayward to be encapsulated. Education or plastics is a "no-brainer" choice: only education can prepare people for the unimaginable future. Plastics, unfortunately, end up in a dump, the colors bleached out by the sun, warped and distorted by the changes of time.

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