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What Does It Mean to Be Well-Educated?

By Alfie Kohn

No one should offer pronouncements about what it means to be well-educated without meeting my ex-wife. When I met her, she was at Harvard, putting the finishing touches on her doctoral dissertation in anthropology. A year later, having spent her entire life in school, she decided to do the only logical thing . . . and apply to medical school. She subsequently became a successful practicing physician. However, she will freeze up if you ask her what 8 times 7 is, because she never learned the multiplication table. And forget about grammar (“Me and him went over her house today” is fairly typical) or literature (“Who’s Faulkner?”).

So what do you make of this paradox? Is she a walking indictment of the system that let her get so far — 29 years of schooling, not counting medical residency — without acquiring the basics of English and math? Or does she offer an invitation to rethink what it means to be well-educated since what she lacks didn’t prevent her from becoming a high-functioning, multiply credentialed, professionally successful individual?

Of course, if those features describe what it means to be well-educated, then there is no dilemma to be resolved. She fits the bill. The problem arises only if your definition includes a list of facts and skills that one must have but that she lacks. In that case, though, my ex-wife is not alone. Thanks to the internet, which allows writers and researchers to circulate rough drafts of their manuscripts, I’ve come to realize just how many truly brilliant people cannot spell or punctuate. Their insights and discoveries may be changing the shape of their respective fields, but they can’t use an apostrophe correctly to save their lives.

Or what about me (he suddenly inquired, relinquishing his comfortable perch from which issue all those judgments of other people)? I could embarrass myself pretty quickly by listing the number of classic works of literature I’ve never read. And I can multiply reasonably well, but everything mathematical I was taught after first-year algebra (and even some of that) is completely gone. How well-educated am I?

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The issue is sufficiently complex that questions are easier to formulate than answers. So let’s at least be sure we’re asking the right questions and framing them well.

1. The Point of Schooling: Rather than attempting to define what it means to be well-educated, should we instead be asking about the purposes of education? The latter formulation invites us to look beyond academic goals. For example, Nel Noddings, professor emerita at Stanford University, urges us to reject “the deadly notion that the schools’ first priority should be intellectual development” and contends that “the main aim of education should be to produce competent, caring,

loving, and lovable people.” Alternatively, we might wade into [the dispute](#) between those who see education as a means to creating or sustaining a democratic society and those who believe its primary role is economic, amounting to an “investment” in future workers and, ultimately, corporate profits. In short, perhaps the question “How do we know if education has been successful?” shouldn’t be posed until we have asked what it’s supposed to be successful at.

2. Evaluating People vs. Their Education: Does the phrase well-educated refer to a quality of the schooling you received, or to something about you? Does it denote what you were taught, or what you learned (and remember)? If the term applies to what you now know and can do, you could be poorly educated despite having received a top-notch education. However, if the term refers to the quality of your schooling, then we’d have to conclude that a lot of “well-educated” people sat through lessons that barely registered, or at least are hazy to the point of irrelevance a few years later.

3. An Absence of Consensus: Is it even possible to agree on a single definition of what every high school student should know or be able to do in order to be considered well-educated? Is such a definition expected to remain invariant across cultures (with a single standard for the U.S. and Somalia, for example), or even across subcultures (South-Central Los Angeles and Scarsdale; a Louisiana fishing community, the upper East side of Manhattan, and Pennsylvania Dutch country)? How about across historical eras: would anyone seriously argue that our criteria for “well-educated” today are exactly the same as those used a century ago – or that they should be?

To cast a skeptical eye on such claims is not necessarily to suggest that the term is purely relative: you like vanilla, I like chocolate; you favor knowledge about poetry, I prefer familiarity with the Gettysburg Address. Some criteria are more defensible than others. Nevertheless, we have to acknowledge a striking absence of consensus about what the term ought to mean. Furthermore, any consensus that does develop is ineluctably rooted in time and place. It is misleading and even dangerous to justify our own pedagogical values by pretending they are grounded in some objective, transcendent Truth, as though the quality of being well-educated is a Platonic form waiting to be discovered.

4. Some Poor Definitions: Should we instead try to stipulate which answers don’t make sense? I’d argue that certain attributes are either insufficient (possessing them isn’t enough to make one well-educated) or unnecessary (one can be well-educated without possessing them) — or both. Let us therefore consider ruling out:

Seat time. Merely sitting in classrooms for x hours doesn’t make one well-educated.

Job skills. It would be a mistake to reduce schooling to vocational preparation, if only because we can easily imagine graduates who are well-prepared for the workplace (or at least for some workplaces) but whom we would not regard as well-educated. In any case, pressure to redesign secondary education to suit the demands of employers reflects little more than the financial interests — and the political power — of these corporations.

Test scores. To a disconcerting extent, high scores on standardized tests signify a facility with taking standardized tests. Most teachers can instantly name students who are talented thinkers but who just don’t do well on these exams – as well as students whose scores seem to overestimate their intellectual gifts. Indeed, researchers have found a statistically significant correlation between high scores on a range of standardized tests and a shallow approach to learning. In any case, no single test is sufficiently valid, reliable, or meaningful that it can be treated as a marker for academic success.

Memorization of a bunch o' facts. Familiarity with a list of words, names, books, and ideas is a uniquely poor way to judge who is well-educated. As the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead observed long ago, "A merely well-informed man is the most useless bore on God's earth. . . . Scraps of information" are only worth something if they are put to use, or at least "thrown into fresh combinations."

Look more carefully at the superficially plausible claim that you must be familiar with, say, King Lear in order to be considered well-educated. To be sure, it's a classic meditation on mortality, greed, belated understanding, and other important themes. But how familiar with it must you be? Is it enough that you can name its author, or that you know it's a play? Do you have to be able to recite the basic plot? What if you read it once but barely remember it now?

If you don't like that example, pick another one. How much do you have to know about neutrinos, or the Boxer rebellion, or the side-angle-side theorem? If deep understanding is required, then (a) very few people could be considered well-educated (which raises serious doubts about the reasonableness of such a definition), and (b) the number of items about which anyone could have that level of knowledge is sharply limited because time is finite. On the other hand, how can we justify a cocktail-party level of familiarity with all these items - reminiscent of Woody Allen's summary of War and Peace after taking a speed-reading course: "It's about Russia." What sense does it make to say that one person is well-educated for having a single sentence's worth of knowledge about the Progressive Era or photosynthesis, while someone who has to look it up is not?

Knowing a lot of stuff may seem harmless, albeit insufficient, but the problem is that efforts to shape schooling around this goal, dressed up with pretentious labels like "cultural literacy" or "content rich," have the effect of taking time away from more meaningful objectives, such as knowing how to think* or deriving pleasure from doing so. If the Bunch o' Facts model proves a poor foundation on which to decide who is properly educated, it makes no sense to peel off items from such a list and assign clusters of them to students at each grade level. It is as poor a basis for designing curriculum as it is for judging the success of schooling.

The number of people who do, in fact, confuse the possession of a storehouse of knowledge with being "smart" - the latter being a disconcertingly common designation for those who fare well on quiz shows - is testament to the naïve appeal that such a model holds. But there are also political implications to be considered here. To emphasize the importance of absorbing a pile of information is to support a larger worldview that sees the primary purpose of education as reproducing our current culture. It is probably not a coincidence that a Core Knowledge model wins rave reviews from Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum (and other conservative Christian groups) as well as from the likes of Investor's Business Daily. To be sure, not every individual who favors this approach is a right-winger, but defining the notion of educational mastery in terms of the number of facts one can recall is well-suited to the task of preserving the status quo. By contrast, consider Dewey's suggestion that an educated person is one who has "gained the power of reflective attention, the power to hold problems, questions, before the mind." Without this capability, he added, "the mind remains at the mercy of custom and external suggestions."

5. Mandating a Single Definition: Who gets to decide what it means to be well-educated? Even assuming that you and I agree to include one criterion and exclude another, that doesn't mean our definition should be imposed with the force of law - taking the form, for example, of requirements for a high school diploma. There are other considerations, such as the real suffering imposed on individuals who aren't permitted to graduate from high school, the egregious disparities in resources and opportunities available in different neighborhoods, and so on.

More to the point, the fact that so many of us don't agree suggests that a national (or, better yet,

international) conversation should continue, that one definition may never fit all, and, therefore, that we should leave it up to local communities to decide who gets to graduate. But that is not what has happened. In about half the states, people sitting atop Mount Olympus have decreed that anyone who doesn't pass a certain standardized test will be denied a diploma and, by implication, classified as inadequately educated. This example of accountability gone haywire violates not only common sense but the consensus of educational measurement specialists. And the consequences are entirely predictable: no high school graduation for a disproportionate number of students of color, from low-income neighborhoods, with learning disabilities, attending vocational schools, or not yet fluent in English.

Less obviously, the idea of making diplomas contingent on passing an exam answers by default the question of what it means to be well- (or sufficiently) educated: Rather than grappling with the messy issues involved, we simply declare that standardized tests will tell us the answer. This is disturbing not merely because of the inherent limits of the tests, but also because teaching becomes distorted when passing those tests becomes the paramount goal. Students arguably receive an inferior education when pressure is applied to raise their test scores, which means that high school exit exams may actually lower standards.

Beyond proclaiming "Pass this standardized test or you don't graduate," most states now issue long lists of curriculum standards, containing hundreds of facts, skills, and subskills that all students are expected to master at a given grade level and for a given subject. These standards are not guidelines but mandates (to which teachers are supposed to "align" their instruction). In effect, a Core Knowledge model, with its implication of students as interchangeable receptacles into which knowledge is poured, has become the law of the land in many places. Surely even defenders of this approach can appreciate the difference between arguing in its behalf and requiring that every school adopt it.

6. The Good School: Finally, instead of asking what it means to be well-educated, perhaps we should inquire into the qualities of a school likely to offer a good education. I've offered my own answer to that question at [book length](#), as have many others. As I see it, the best sort of schooling is organized around problems, projects, and questions - as opposed to facts, skills, and disciplines. Knowledge is acquired, of course, but in a context and for a purpose. The emphasis is not only on depth rather than breadth, but also on discovering ideas rather than on covering a prescribed curriculum. Teachers are generalists first and specialists (in a given subject matter) second; they commonly collaborate to offer interdisciplinary courses that students play an active role in designing. All of this happens in small, democratic schools that are experienced as caring communities.

Notwithstanding the claims of traditionalists eager to offer - and then dismiss - a touchy-feely caricature of progressive education, a substantial body of evidence exists to support the effectiveness of each of these components as well as the benefits of using them in combination. By contrast, it isn't easy to find any data to justify the traditional (and still dominant) model of secondary education: large schools, short classes, huge student loads for each teacher, a fact-transmission kind of instruction that is the very antithesis of "student-centered," the virtual absence of any attempt to integrate diverse areas of study, the rating and ranking of students, and so on. Such a system acts as a powerful obstacle to good teaching, and it thwarts the best efforts of many talented educators on a daily basis.

Low-quality instruction can be assessed with low-quality tests, including homegrown quizzes and standardized exams designed to measure (with faux objectivity) the number of facts and skills crammed into short-term memory. The effects of high-quality instruction are trickier, but not impossible, to assess. The most promising model turns on the notion of "exhibitions" of learning, in which students reveal their understanding by means of in-depth projects, portfolios of assignments,

and other demonstrations - a model pioneered by Ted Sizer, Deborah Meier, and others affiliated with the Coalition of Essential Schools. By now we're fortunate to have access not only to essays about how this might be done (such as Sizer's invaluable Horace series) but to books about schools that are actually doing it: *The Power of Their Ideas* by Meier, about Central Park East Secondary School in New York City; *Rethinking High School* by Harvey Daniels and his colleagues, about Best Practice High School in Chicago; and *One Kid at a Time* by Eliot Levine, about the Met in Providence, RI.

The assessments in such schools are based on meaningful standards of excellence, standards that may collectively offer the best answer to our original question simply because to meet those criteria is as good a way as any to show that one is well-educated. The Met School focuses on social reasoning, empirical reasoning, quantitative reasoning, communication, and personal qualities (such as responsibility, capacity for leadership, and self-awareness). Meier has emphasized the importance of developing five "habits of mind": the value of raising questions about evidence ("How do we know what we know?"), point of view ("Whose perspective does this represent?"), connections ("How is this related to that?"), supposition ("How might things have been otherwise?"), and relevance ("Why is this important?").

It's not only the ability to raise and answer those questions that matters, though, but also the disposition to do so. For that matter, any set of intellectual objectives, any description of what it means to think deeply and critically, should be accompanied by a reference to one's interest or intrinsic motivation to do such thinking. Dewey reminded us that the goal of education is more education. To be well-educated, then, is to have the desire as well as the means to make sure that learning never ends.

* The standard retort from the "bunch o' facts" contingent is that no one thinks in a vacuum, that cognitive skills are necessarily employed with respect to particular items of knowledge. You need facts to analyze, a storehouse of information on which to reflect. But this is a straw-man argument because no one argues that kids should be taught to think about nothing. (Frankly, it's not clear how we would do that even if it seemed like a good idea.) Rather, disagreement exists regarding the extent to build a curriculum — and, inevitably, assessments — around knowledge as opposed to skills and intellectual dispositions. Are facts treated as ends in themselves or as illustrative cases by which to understand the world? That bits of information (a) are so often quickly forgotten, particularly when they're treated as ends in themselves, and (b) can be looked up on your phone when they're actually needed constitute two strong arguments for the latter approach. A classroom whose primary focus is described by phrases such as deep understanding, critical thinking, creativity, and the construction of meaning isn't one that's devoid of facts. But its purposes go well beyond the transmission of a long list of dates, definitions, and other details.

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