

## A few thoughts on education

I'm a bit of an anomaly in terms of college students, in that I was a high school dropout. During my sophomore year of high school I dropped out, then one and a half years later I ended up back on the traditional education path. Of late I've been wondering where exactly the value of college lies, both for society and for myself.

Starting in about my third week of high school I found myself both not enjoying it and questioning the methodologies and philosophies employed by my school. It wasn't until over a year later, just after winter break in my sophomore year that I finally decided it wasn't worth it. There were a number of issues I had with my school (or more accurately the program I was in at the school), most fundamentally I despised the emphasis placed on raw output, rather than any other factors. People who have read *The Snarkout Boys and the Avocado of Death*, by Daniel Pinkwater, may recall that one of the issues the narrator has with his school is teachers mindlessly assign work and then the final product is graded on their notebook at the end (as the narrator notes the grades in his English class are literally determined by weighing the notebook). From all of this the narrator, Walter Galt, infers that the teachers don't care what the students learn, their mean objective is, if anyone challenged whether they were teaching, to be able to point to the students notebooks and be able to say, "See! They know all about photosynthesis and asexual reproduction." The prevalence of this attitude is perhaps best seen in my freshman European History course. In this class every Friday you were expected to have an outline (probably 3-5 pages on average) covering the assigned chapters to read. Every 2 weeks there was a test, covering the material from this reading and these outlines. Though the class occasionally featured discussions, time in class was by and large spent in a lecture and questions format. Grades in this class were determined 50% by tests and 50% by the outlines. The average grade on tests was probably a mid-C, and the teachers (the course had multiple sections that were run in an identical fashion by 3 teachers) well knew this, it was explicitly stated that outlines were weighted so heavily to ensure students could still receive a good grade. There are other examples of this, but hopefully this gives you the general idea of what my school was like.

I'll note (for completeness) that at the time I dropped out my grades were pretty bad (my GPA was about 2.4 I believe). The overwhelming instinct (at least among people I know), is not to infer from this set of circumstances that there is something wrong with our education system (or at least my school), but instead that there is something wrong with me, that I'm lazy, that I'm a slacker, or that I don't care. If that's your inference I'm not going to do anything to dissuade you of it, either you believe

that I'm a slacker, or you accept the premise that maybe something is wrong with our system. Maybe that's a fair indictment against me, certainly most kids with lousy grades who dropout fit that profile. Certainly if I could go back and do it again I'd like to say that I would try to kickass at the work (no matter how mindless and pointless), it's way easier to make the case that the classes are lousy at their stated purpose when you aren't failing them.

After dropping out I spent the next year and a half essentially homeschooling myself. I taught myself programming, economics, pedagogy, took a calculus course at a local community college, and spent a lot of time volunteering with one of the presidential campaigns. I also applied to college in this time. Ultimately two colleges were willing to take the dice roll that is taking a student who's already quit school once. I'd been told, for about as long as I can remember, that college is different from high school and elementary (of course I was also told that high school is different from elementary school, apparently different means strictly worse). However, after almost a year and half in college I'm starting to wonder whether this is true, and if it is, is it at least better?

Before I left my high school I read several books on education, most importantly *The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing*, by Alfie Kohn. At the time this book spoke very clearly to my frustrations with school, however after leaving and reading another one of Kohn's books, *The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and "Tougher Standards"*, I realized that I could find some of almost anything my friends didn't like about school in it's pages. Almost all of my friends are very smart people who got very good grades in high school and are going to better colleges than I am. Both of these books focused on how our educational practices aren't effective at their stated purposes. I read another book about educational practices (whose name I can't recall) which focused on something different, the effect various school practices have on the emotional health of students. This book didn't resonate very well with me (probably because I avoided the entire issue by refusing to participate), however I lent it to a friend and it definitely struck a chord with him (he's in the aforementioned group of people with better grades and a better college than me). It turns out at least 1/3 of the kids who start out in the program I was in won't be in it by the time of graduation. I'd say 80-90% of these students leave the program for emotional/mental health reasons, not intelligence.

Where was I? Right, college was supposed to be different. One of the most common things I was told about college was that there wasn't homework like one has in elementary or high school, instead you were just expected to study on your own time for exams. I don't know whether colleges have changed significantly since the people I heard this from were in one, but this is one of the least true things I've ever heard. Indeed things like lecture based classes are used even more frequently.

There is one way college is distinctly different from high school and elementary school: students are (mostly) away from home for the first time and so there is a distinctly different culture/atmosphere.

Conservatives like to talk about "grade inflation" (meaning the belief that everyone should just get an A in every class, which they believe the liberals have), I don't know where this belief comes from, however there's another type of "grade inflation": the number of school grades the average person has graduated. I should preface this all by saying I'm not opposed to people having less education (if you look at some of the statistics on American's knowledge about various basic historical facts or beliefs about evolution it's blindingly obvious that too much school isn't the problem). Over the 75 years are so (particularly since the end of World War II and the GI Bill) college has gone from something primarily attended by the rich or very intelligent to something that is almost a societal expectation (at least within the middle and upper class). Perhaps not so surprisingly one of the ideas most associated with college since this happened: students partying and drinking excessively.

College in the United States has gone from being an additional level of education to being a social construct, which for some reason glorifies partying and drinking, which is part of a very simple equation, getting a degree equal finding a job. Over this same period of time trade schools and apprenticeships, formerly a fundamental part of the school to work transition, have increasingly fallen out of favor. I don't know what the cause of this trend is, certainly more education has been a trend for a very long time and is the root cause for a ton of the social change over the past 300-400 years. There are a lot of good theories as to why this is, for example due to medical advances our lifespans have also been increasing, a longer life means more time for education, better quality of life means more luxuries (like higher education), ultimately why this trend exists is immaterial to the reality: it does exist.

This has all been a pretty verbose way of me describing the failings of my high school, and how I'm seeing some of the same trends in college. But where does that leave me? I was exceptionally lucky to be able to break through the barrier of having no high school diploma (besides a GED) and make it into a decent college. After college the usual path is to a job, would I be able to break that barrier with no degree? Statistics show us that the workforce very much likes degrees (or at least some attribute of people who happen to have degrees). I've already broken that barrier to some extent (I work now). I've had friends advise me to get out of school, I can easily get a job now. I've had others ask, "If the Django/Python community evaporated tomorrow would you still be able to get a job?". The truth is I already have a job now, and I'm not concerned about Django or Python disappearing tomorrow, or even a year from now, but a far more interesting question is, "If I don't get a degree now, will I regret that in 30 years?", and the more frightening (to me at least), "if I don't get a degree, I'll have neither a high school nor college diploma".

I don't think my dislike of my schools is anything intrinsic about a classroom, at every stage where I've disliked my school I've also had classes that I loved. The reality is at any point where work was emphasized over learning, and output valued over the thought both my classmates, and I have deplored it, the difference is I've refused to participate. I've been told that maybe this represents an unrealistic perspective, that I shouldn't expect everything to be enjoyable, or interesting. I don't think this is the case, I simply don't think it's a good use of my time to go on with it if there isn't a purpose.

I don't want to spend too much time on how teachers can improve their own classrooms, as I feel there's already a lot of good material out there (much of which is referenced in Kohn's works), however, there are a few things I want to note. First of all, anything handled as a discussion is going to be most interesting (even to students who don't like to participate), I've always been so surprised that my high school history classes were the worst offenders in terms of ignoring the potential for discussions and critical thinking. I can see how a math or science teacher could find it difficult to structure their material in terms of a discussion, but for history it's almost trivial to come up with interesting discussions, or questions which prompt critical thinking. It's important to note that my recommendation isn't to completely throw away any form of formal work or assignments, just that no one is served (at any educational level) by a teacher who comes up with a schedule and a list of assignments months before a class begins and then assigns them as the schedule prescribes. Asking students to write one or two paragraphs in response to an interesting discussion that took place in class will universally produce a better result (more learning and interest in the material) than telling students to write an outline of the same material from a text book.

Finally I want to thank a number of teachers and professors who were excellent, despite the fact that our educational system doesn't really give them any incentives to be:

- Maurice LaBonte, for helping become a remotely competent writer.
- Elizabeth Skydell, for teaching math and science in a way that embodies all of the attributes that a class should have.
- Joseph Baron, for teaching a year of science without assigning a single homework assignment and making learning about mollusks (and so much else) interesting.
- Doug Davis, for making writing more about the writer and less about the prompt.
- Dr. Jeff Ellison, for sheer excellence.
- Duffy Deitz, though I retrospectively disagree with a lot about your class, you taught me that learning something is more than just knowing it.
- James Galinski, for extending me the chance to help make your classroom as good as it could

be, I regret that I wasn't around long enough for make that happen.

- Dr. Langdon Winner and Dr. Nancy Campbell, for showing that a larger class doesn't diminish its ability to discuss things, or the value that comes from it.

Each of these teachers has gone far above the call of duty, they have strived to ensure that their students not only learned, but that they enjoyed it, and that they took the lessons with them beyond the end of the year.

I don't have a miracle solution for our education system, nor am I quite sure where I'm headed (or what others in a similar position should do). However, I do have a pair of final questions: Have you ever learned more from being told something than for figuring it out for yourself? And does our society value a degree, or the learning it represents more?