

# Toward a Redefinition of Relevance

In the spring of 1978, Harvard, The University of California-Berkeley, and a number of smaller colleges throughout the country adopted curriculum changes in the core requirements for undergraduates—changes designed to give students broader exposure to courses outside their majors. The reasons given for these changes were voiced in similar terms by most who supported them: freedom in the choice of electives, demanded in the 1960s by a student population preoccupied with self-expressed and social awareness, had produced a graduate with a narrow outlook. In the 1970s, students' preoccupation with finding a job in a depressed economy caused them to ignore breadth in favor of specialization.

There is much to be said for a move towards broadening a student's exposure to diverse material. America has always been strong in the face of short-term problems and weak in long-term vision, and breadth of exposure can only help us as we strive for a unifying overview. However, we should remember that wide-ranging freedom in course selection was made in concession to a student demand indigenous to the 1960s, but one that is as little addressed today as it was a decade ago: the cry for relevance.

Students in the 1960s felt they were faced with a world rapidly coming apart at the seams, and they felt that their education did little to help them cope with that disintegration. Ten years later

circumstances have changed only in that we now know disintegration to be a slower process than was anticipated during the 1960s' more feverish moments. Where it once expected an apocalypse, America has found that a decline takes place over a period of several generations, and that myopia and anomie are the real enemies we confront. In this decade, the problem of education's relevance still remains to be faced. As educators, we are unsure about how education is made relevant to personal existence, about how what we teach can have a real impact during, and especially after, their education.

## What Is Relevance?

We know that relevance involves more than token social awareness. Though we live in a highly politicized world, there is much in the sciences, the arts, business, law, and even the social sciences that a "social problems" approach cannot do justice to. But for the most part we lack a good definition for relevance. We hope that our lesson plans and lectures have real meaning for students, and we wonder if they do. We need a redefinition of relevance, one that will allow us to teach Einstein and Shakespeare with the same confidence about their immediate importance that we have about ecology and Bob Dylan, a redefinition that will take relevance beyond the "what's happening" approach. I would like to propose such a redefinition here.

Relevance is that quality of education that fosters responsibility. Learning, in the philosophical sense, is a function of experience: we learn by acting, and then reflecting on what we have done to discover whether or not the premises of our actions were valid. When we learn well—or, as Sartre might say, "in good faith"—we become *responsible*, we react to the insight that experience has afforded us. So too with students. When a student truly learns he/she *responds* to the material; it takes on new meaning and he/she changes because of it.

Take, for example, a course taught at Stanford University each spring called "Physics for Poets." The premises of the course are apparent in the title: people who are accustomed to communicating through images often have difficulty with science because of its connection with and

reliance upon mathematics. However, when an enlightened scientist can demonstrate how highly imagistic science is, and how fascinated scientists are with discovering beautiful—and even fearful—symmetry, the mathematically naive can still respond to the material. The same is true of the enlightened humanities teacher who can show students with a rigorously scientific background how art takes the chaotic and gives it harmony and balance, as science does. Such teachers make their students responsible for the material by allowing them to respond to it; students begin to see a subject in terms of their own world view, and the material becomes relevant as a matter of course. No one in the arts who has had the workings of the solar system explained in a vivid and imagistic way can ever again see the night sky without a sense of its aesthetically balanced motion, any more than a scientist who has had the atomic structure of social circles in Tolstoy can ever look at personal relationships again without intuiting their antecedents. Such breakthroughs force us to remember how false the dichotomy between arts and sciences really is.

### The Importance of Enlightened Instructors

Relevance has been an inadequate goal for education, not because it is an unimportant goal, but because it is merely a *symptom* of education's success, not the reason for it. When education succeeds, it succeeds because a student has experienced the material encountered. The student has responded to it, and the intensity of that response has made the material relevant to his/her existence. Sometimes this happens because a student has an inherent interest in the material; but often—and especially with “general education” courses—the student responds because an enlightened instructor has approached the subject with imagination and empathy for the uninitiated.

Can we all be such instructors? I can think of several reasons why we can. First, most of us are in our profession because our area of interest moves us. In some way, often impossible to articulate, the subjects we teach generate energy in us when we are exhausted, attract our attention when we are distracted, and give us hope when there is none. Even at the most frustrating times

we realize that our subjects have the power to enrich our lives—and the lives of others.

Second, most of us have a natural instinct for our subjects, and that instinct is a powerful tool when put in the service of teaching others. Something “clicks” between us and the area we have chosen to teach, and when we understand the nature of that affinity, we begin to see how it can be put to good use in the classroom.

Finally, we all have the advantage of experience with our subjects. We have lived with them, loved them, fought them, accepted them, and been accepted by them; we know their strengths and weaknesses, their idiosyncrasies and their perils. And we have seen how the developing intimacy with all these things has changed our lives.

An enlightened teacher who compels a dynamic and ongoing response from students does little more than take a love for that subject, an intuitive “feel” for it and experience with it, and use these to intensify the students’ experience with the material. Given the chance, most students will take a look into the teacher’s world; and quite often the teacher’s own interest, unself-consciously revealed, can provide the motivation for that look.

I recently attended a rather dull and monotonous biology lecture given by a man who had the good sense to voice tangential thoughts as they came to him. For instance, remarking on the cyclic appearance of certain infectious organisms, he embarked on a heartfelt and interesting discussion of the cyclic occurrence of rabbit scarcity in Alaska—a point for hunters to keep in mind, he said. I doubt that many of us in the audience did much rabbit hunting in Alaska, but the cyclic recurrence of such apparently extraneous remarks exposed us to a disarming affection for the ways of nature, enthralled us a bit, and gave color to what would otherwise have been a mechanical presentation.

Most teachers try to suppress tangential thoughts, for all kinds of reasons: economy of time, desire to appear organized, or fear of exposure. But a teacher who is willing to expose himself/herself and a love for the subject can let intuition take over, and gradually, sometimes almost imperceptibly, this teacher’s understanding of how the material broadens one’s perceptions and deepens one’s understanding will communicate itself to the students. As a first-year student,

### What Should All Students Learn?

The January 1980 issue of *Educational Leadership* will examine the theme of "General Education." We welcome thoughtful manuscripts on various aspects of that subject, such as analyses of the goals of elementary and secondary education, arguments for inclusion of particular content or experiences in programs required of all students, and proposals for redesign of the entire curriculum.

ASCD has established a committee to review various proposals for curriculum reform at the high school level, to consider their merits and prospects for their adoption, and perhaps to sponsor schools that elect to try improved arrangements. That's why we are especially interested in the subject and look forward to a discussion of it. Deadline for submission of manuscripts is October 1, 1979.

I had a music teacher who remarked as an aside that musical fifths begin to appear naturally when a person has sung for a number of years. At the time, I could not sing a line of harmonic fifths, but the remark gave me a signpost to watch for as I tried to develop musically. When, two or three years later, I found myself singing and whistling fifths naturally, I remembered the remark and understood that I had reached a higher degree of musical sophistication. I had that teacher's reflection on his own development—and his willingness to share that reflection with his students—to thank for my own insight.

Such a process of guided evolution is what education is all about. I continue to believe that we teach students little that they do not already know, or will learn through experience. As educators, we give shape to a student's intuitive knowledge, we encourage the student to use it to interpret his/her own experience, and we show the student the ways in which we ourselves have learned to do so. But *how* we approach this task is critical. A teacher who can approach Newton with imagination can teach the student to use instinctive knowledge of the laws of physics to understand the pre-Einsteinian world; and such a teacher does more to change a student's world view than one who makes Hermann Hesse color-

less and dry. A subject's relevance is not, as we often thought it was during the 1960s, measured only by its social importance. It is not measured by its ability to make a student employable.

Relevance is a function of how much substantive change a subject introduces into a student's life, of the degree to which it can teach him/her to meet reality halfway, neither impinging on it too greatly nor retreating from it too much. As we begin to realign our educational goals in the face of society's changing needs, we must accept the lessons of the past and satisfy those needs that are unchanging.

The effort to educate the majority of its people is one of the most admirable traits of American democracy. However, the tendency to approach education quantitatively, as an exercise in intellectual accumulation, is a liability of our capitalistic heritage. We reject the classical notion that education is for the few, but we have not yet found the secret for making education as meaningful for the masses as it once was for the select. We still tend to create instructional cafeterias that traffic in fads in an attempt to be meaningful. There is no simple solution to this dilemma, but a large part of the responsibility for solutions lies with us, the educators. When we bring real dynamism into the classroom, when we inject imagination into our teaching, we will have begun to make education meaningful, both for today's student and for tomorrow's. When we recognize how our subjects change our views of life and develop that understanding as an aspect of our teaching, we will have begun to cultivate breadth and depth in society-at-large. Only then will education be able to lay a claim to relevance; only then will we have made ourselves relevant. And perhaps in the process, we will have come to accept teaching itself as a learning process.



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