

Education is an abstract, a dangerous one. What is it? It is difficult to say. Rather like quality, it defies analysis. Everybody knows what it is. Nobody knows what it is.

"Quality ... you know what it is, yet you can't know what it is ... But some things are better than others: that is they have more quality. But when you try to say what the quality is ... There is nothing to talk about. But if you can't say what quality is, how do you know what it is, or how do you know that it even exists? If no one knows what it is, then for practical purposes it doesn't exist at all. But for all practical purposes it really does exist ... Why else would people pay fortunes for some things and throw others (away)? Obviously some things are better than others ... but what's the 'betterness'? ... So round and round you go ...

"What the hell is quality? What is it?"

R. M. Pirsig Zen and the Art of Motor Cycle
Maintenance

Education is a dangerous abstract in that far too often the idea of the 'educated person' is that of a scholarly individual who has been neither educated nor trained to exercise useful skills; who is able to understand, but not to act. We have to think of both 'education' and 'training' and to get the balance right. Young people in secondary or higher education too often specialise in ways which mean they are taught to practice only the skills of scholarship. They acquire knowledge, but are not equipped to use it in ways which are relevant to the world outside the education system.

This sort of skew is harmful to the individual and to society, certainly the one we have inherited in the late twentieth century. Analysis and the acquisition of knowledge are clearly important, but 'education' should also embrace the exercise of creative skills, the competence to undertake and complete tasks and the ability to cope with the problems of living; and doing all these things in cooperation with other men and women.

The great majority of pupils in schools, students at universities, polytechnics or colleges, or adults still wanting to learn - are destined or should be for a life of action. They are going to want to do things, design things, make things, organise things, and usually in cooperation with other people.

These are the qualities of 'Renaissance Man', perhaps idealised, yet it does seem that educators spend too little time preparing people for a life outside the education system, and that society in Britain over-values the virtues of scholarship, which underlie many of the formal processes of education in this country, and undervalues a culture which does exist and which is concerned with doing, making and organising, and involves creativity (these matters are contained in the education system but are given little prominence and often dismissed as mere aspects of training). It is all a matter of balance!

"Balliol College

Sir, I have read your letter with interest; and judging from your description of yourself as a working man I venture to think that you will have a much better chance of success in life by remaining in your own sphere and sticking to your trade than by adopting any other course. That, therefore, is what I advise you to do.

Yours faithfully,
T. Tetuphancy

To Mr. J. Fawley, Stonemason
Thomas Hardy Jude the Obscure

It shouldn't happen now, of course, but polytechnics have only been going for fifteen years. Give us a chance.