If You’re Headed in The Wrong Direction Walking Faster {With Improved Style} Won’t Help You

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Imagine you are an Athenian man among a group of your fellow citizens about two and a half thousand years ago. Ahead of you, and slightly raised, is a stone altar, beside which wood burns and crackles in a shallow pit. Smoke is rising from a hole in the altar at the farthest end from the pit. A heifer, meticulously groomed is being led towards the altar by two men whom you know. The heifer kicks and then moos. Startled by the fire and the silent crowd it is firmly forced up the steps.

The priestess raises her arms, praises the wisdom of the goddess and asks Athena to accept this pure sacrifice and to enjoy the rich smell of its burning meat. The blade of a long knife flashes down into the neck of the heifer. There is a momentary squeal, then as its legs give way, silence. The animal is skilfully butchered. Its entrails are scooped into long bowls and placed before the priestess on the altar while the carcass is tossed into the burning pit. The priestess pours a cup of wine onto the hissing sacrifice.

As the carcass continues to sizzle, you and your fellow-citizens stand but remain silent, watch the priestess swiftly cut away the liver and tip the remnant entrails into the smoking hole at the side of the altar. The pungent smell delights the gods. All eyes watch intently as the priestess carefully dissects, until after a few seemingly endless minutes, her bloodied hands hold up pieces of the liver. She shouts, proclaiming the unspotted quality of the sacrifice, certain that Athena is pleased with the sacrifice and guarantees success in battle against the Corinthians. A great shout thunders through...
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You are thinking of preceding your thesis with a quotation from Ludwig Wittgenstein, a philosopher contemporary with the schools of your research: “One must first uncover the source of error otherwise hearing the truth won’t help us.” A part of your difficulty in composing your argument is that those who will view it are spread across eight star systems and will find it incomprehensible that anyone could ever have believed such an institution provided a sensible way to educate children.

Well, now that I have dragged you through these past and future scenarios, let us leave our ancient Greeks eating their roasted heifer, anxious and excited at the prospect of war, and our historian preparing for her morning’s work, feeling the warmth of distant Sirius rising and obliterating the sight of the five moons currently in the sky. I have suggested that our problems with education are more fundamental than people have believed. Most books about educational practices have communicated an assorted array of reforms which they believe would make the school system function satisfactorily. We have to address the tougher task of reframing the idea of education that we have inherited from ancient and more modern Europe and its tangled history.

Conflicting ideas

The vast array of activities within our schools today is quite remarkable. Society is pushing demands upon school personnel which extend far beyond the original purposes of the public school system. We expect teachers to monitor, directly and indirectly, student health and drug regimens, psychotherapy services, sports and band activities, car wash drives aimed at raising money for athletic or science fair
teams, projects that aid children who are living in impoverished conditions around the globe, rehearsals for musicals and plays, and road safety. Participation in this wide range of activities varies depending upon school traditions, administrative preferences and the interest level and ability of individual teachers.

In our educational system which seems to be spinning out of control as more and more activities are being required of those working within our schools, we need to find some sense of order which can help explain the ever broadening complexity of the purpose of education. Three distinct ideas constitute what most people think of when we speak of education.

We seem to want schools to do three main things. The oldest idea is society-oriented: preparing students to be productive members of society. That is, any activities we introduce to schools whose purpose is to better prepare students for their future social life—skills that are justified in terms of the jobs they will be able to do as adults, the attitudes and commitments that a generally tolerant and humane social life requires, the basic forms of literacy and numeracy that adequate citizenship calls for, and any sports or computer or driving or behavioral skills that successful social life demands—counts as "society-oriented". The aim of education, in this view, is to shape individuals to become good citizens who demonstrate competency in a range of appropriate skills and are equipped with knowledge relevant for their time and place.

The second idea, as old as those ancient Greeks, we may call “academic.” This educational practice is made up of all those things we might do with students that are designed primarily to improve their minds—regardless of social utility. So, we teach many things that have no practical use because knowing them is good for the mind rather than good for social life; we would think it disgraceful if students emerged from their years of schooling not knowing that the earth goes around the sun. The aim of education, in this view, is to teach those special forms of knowledge that will bring the mind to the fullest understanding of the world and experience.

The third big educational idea is about two and a half centuries old and is a product of Enlightenment views about Nature. Instead of seeing education in terms of the skills one wants children to acquire to become useful citizens or the knowledge one wants them to learn for the good of their minds, people like Rousseau—as if there were other people like Rousseau!—thought education should focus on the whole person, recognizing that education was not simply something done to children for some supposed future social or intellectual benefit, but the very experience of being educated was what should be a central focus. Education is what is done during the process, not simply the end product of a process that might itself be tedious, painful, or ‘Gradgrindish’. It is contradictory to think that one might become educated by means of a process that isn’t itself constituted by the values we hold to be inherent in education. And one cannot make the experience educational unless one better understands how children
learn and develop and what motivated them. That is, only by understanding the nature of the child can one educate them through a “natural” process of development through to adulthood. The aim of education, in this view, is to achieve a holistic development of the individual to her or his fullest potential.

Most people want all three of these ideas to drive their educational system but in practice the result is that each idea manages to undermine the adequate achievement of the others. Superficially, it may seem that we should be able to implement all three ideas in the same institution at the same time. That, after all, is what most school mission statements claim—they will produce good citizens, with “job-ready skills,” they will aim for academic excellence, and they will strive to develop the individual potential of each student. The question is if it’s so straightforward to manage all of them together, why has there been 150 years of arguments about what the public schools should be doing?

We have taken it so much for granted that schools can incorporate these three different ideas of education that the claim that they are incompatible may seem strange. Let me just take the first two ideas—the “society-oriented” idea and the “academic” idea—and try to clarify why it makes sense to see them as mutually incompatible.

You are invited to imagine a future in which the government has introduced a new way of allotting money for work—stimulated perhaps by the grotesque injustice of the current distribution of wealth and incomes. As a citizen in this future scenario, you will be required to go to the cinema once each week and watch whatever movie is showing. After the movie is over—and after you have carefully read and tried to remember all the credits—you will go out into the foyer. There you will find rows of small tables and chairs. One of the tables will have your name on it. On each table there will be a multiple-choice test about the movie and a pencil for you to mark your responses. The questions will be something like: What was the name of the central character’s horse? Trigger

### Conclusion

We have inherited three foundational ideas about education. Each one of them has flaws, at least one flaw in each being fatal to its ambition to represent an educational ideal we might reasonably endorse. And the worse news is that each of the ideas is incompatible with the other two. These warring ideas hovered around the cradle of the state schools, proffering their gifts. The schools eagerly took them all, and so education remains difficult and contentious.

Our fundamental problem in education is theoretical. Improved and more effective work by all the groups in education will not solve our problem if we have confusion at the root of the system; running faster with improved style will not help us if we are going in the wrong direction. We behave as we do, design schools of the kinds we have, as a result of the ideas we hold. If we want to improve our schools, first we must deal with the abstract and awkward realm of ideas.