

On education

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I can't remember the last time I felt it necessary to close comments on a post because I felt that they had ceased to be useful, but I've now done so on the post that I have made on education, and why I think it is failing so badly.

My primary reason for doing this is because after 115 comments on just one of these two posts I felt that nothing further was being added by any additional commentary. That does, therefore, seem like a good moment to close discussion.

Another reason is that I was becoming quite bored by some of the commentary and the need to carefully repeat myself, endlessly.

Most especially though, after 18 years of writing a blog I have become used to professionals and those with special interest in a subject being abusive about suggestions that I make. Accountants did it when I tackled them on tax abuse. So did lawyers. Politicians were particularly rude. So have right wingers been so. The most common theme has been to suggest that I am an outside idiot who knows nothing about the subject I'm talking about, when evidence has almost invariably shown that the arguments I have presented frequently prevail at the end of the day. I felt some of the teachers commenting have come dangerously close to being in that space.

I'm not, of course, claiming to always be right. I change my mind when appropriate. But in this case I made three points

First, I said that there were more useful things to teach than trigonometry. When there are so many things missing from the curriculum that young people should enjoy this seems to me like a statement of the obvious, but that was apparently not true for others, although very few sought to engage with the point in any positive way. The acceptance of the status quo by most commenting was really quite surprising. I, however, gave some examples, and as a result everyone, it seemed, thought that I was seeking to dumb down the curriculum, as some right wingers would wish. It was also said that I was only interested in teaching finance, which rather worries me about most people's understanding of the importance of budgeting, getting tax right, and many

other issues,

Second, I argue that subjects should be taught contextually so that the student has a hope of understanding them, and will as a result be empowered by the understanding that they develop. Fifty years of experience of enduring and then witnessing maths education in varying roles from being a school student, to a long-term chair of governors of a school, to witnessing my sons' own education, to teaching myself, has persuaded me of this. If you cannot, at the outset, explain why somebody needs to learn something, and why they will benefit from it, the chance that they will engage with what is being taught is very low, whatever the subject. This appears to be true from a very young age right through to undergraduates in my experience. This suggestion has, however, been rejected by some. They have suggested that I am trying to deny the relevance of pure knowledge and the beauty of maths. As someone who actually enjoys maths, and is accused of speaking it by my wife on occasions, I found that quite bizarre, and frustrating.

Third, as discussion continued, it became clear that it was widely agreed, even by those adamant that I am wrong, that the current teaching of maths in schools is very poor. That makes the case that everything I am saying is probably right. Not only are students uninterested in what it is being demanded that they learn, but so too are teachers, which is why it is so incredibly difficult to recruit people to teach this subject. Unless maths is made relevant in a way that students have explained to them, as I suggest should be the case, I am quite sure that this will continue.

Finally, an awful lot of nonsense was said about trigonometry, which is only ratio analysis in various forms at the end of the day. Learn ratio analysis in any other context, and it could be easily be taught to those students who might have need of it they are to pursue subjects where it is required, in my opinion. The belief that there is something unique to it seems to me to be quite straightforwardly wrong.

In that case let me explain what I think the role of education is, because this whole blog effectively exists to educate.

I want to empower people to understand the relevance of a subject, and to have at least some insight as to how that subject relates to the real world and how it might be understood. This seems to me to be the whole purpose of any educational endeavour.

Saying so, I stress that this does not necessarily require that every detail be understood. Most of us are not masters of the things that we have to engage with in life. Instead, learning about the basics of a subject so that we might appraise the quality of the information that we are being supplied with by those who are expert is usually of much greater importance. This also, in my opinion, lays the ethical foundation for those who are going to advance in understanding of that subject so that they might, eventually, be expert in it. They then know what others will demand of them.

Secondly, the context within which education might be supplied must be appropriate. Since the vast majority of children are not academically inclined, the presumption that the requirements of the university maths curriculum must prevail, with maths being taught as an abstract subject of value in itself is, in this context, utterly inappropriate, and inherently alienating for the majority of students, as experience has proven. To pretend that change is not needed in that case is also absurd.

Thirdly, education must have reach, by which I mean the person participating in it, rather than having it forced upon them, must have an understanding of why it can benefit their life to know this subject. This is a suggestion far removed from the accusation that has been made against me, that I am applying the idea that education is only relevant if it is of use to an employer. Instead, my suggestion is that education should empower the person receiving it, whether they are a potential employee or not. I am not interested in them enduring learning that they can see no use for, and which they will not succeed in as a result. I am instead interested in empowering them to critically appraise the demands of others upon them. That is what I mean by having an education that reaches into their life.

I will not be opening comments on this post [Note: I have changed my mind on this: perhaps a few hours break was all I needed]. I got a little bored by some of the comments that I received on the other posts, to be candid, many of which looked remarkably like the defence of a status quo that is far from working well.

So why am I writing this? As usual, partly for my own sake. I write to explore what I think, and then I share it.

I am also doing so to make clear that I am a long way from backing down. In fact, conversations I have had in the past day or so - during which I have been unable to find anyone supporting my critics here - persuade me I would be quite wrong to do so.

And, finally I do so because, as is true of all professions, debate on that profession's activities is far too important to be left to those engaged in it. That is because that usually leads to remarkably poor decision making that preserves the status quo in which those in that profession have much intellectual property invested that they feel imperilled by the criticism made. So of course I have a valid opinion to offer, whether teachers like it or not.