

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Learning as Freedom

By MICHAEL S. ROTH

Published: September 5, 2012 / NYT

Middletown, Conn.

IN March, a task force organized by the Council on Foreign Relations tried to reframe the problems of the nation's public schools as a threat to national security. "Large, undereducated swaths of the population damage the ability of the United States to physically defend itself, protect its secure information, conduct diplomacy, and grow its economy," it warned, while also referring to students as "human capital."

While the report focused on K-12 education and called for better college preparedness, its instrumentalist rhetoric has remarkable affinities with that of critics who see higher education as outmoded. Conservative scholars like Charles Murray, Richard Vedder and Peter W. Wood ask why people destined for low-paying jobs should bother to pursue their education beyond high school, much less study philosophy, literature and history. The venture capitalist Peter Thiel has offered money to would-be entrepreneurs to quit college and focus on Web-based start-ups instead. Business school professors like Clayton M. Christensen tell us that "disruptive innovation" is causing liberal-arts learning to be "disintermediated" so as to deliver just what the "end user" needs.

From this narrow, instrumentalist perspective, students are consumers buying a customized playlist of knowledge.

This critique may be new, but the call for a more narrowly tailored education — especially for Americans with limited economic prospects — is not. A century ago, organizations as varied as chambers of commerce and labor federations backed plans for a dual system of teaching, wherein some students would be trained for specific occupations, while others would get a broad education allowing them to continue their studies in college. The movement led to the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, which financed vocational education, initially for jobs in agriculture and then in other industries.

The philosopher John Dewey, America's most influential thinker on education, opposed this effort. Though he was open to integrating manual training in school curriculums, Dewey opposed the dual-track system because he recognized that it would reinforce the inequalities of his time. Wouldn't such a system have the same result today?

To be sure, Dewey recognized the necessity of gainful employment. "The world in which most of us live is a world in which everyone has a calling and occupation, something to do," he wrote. "Some are managers and others are subordinates. But the great thing for one as for the other is that each shall have had the education which enables him to see within his daily work all there is in it of large and human significance."

Education should aim to enhance our capacities, Dewey argued, so that we are not reduced to mere tools. "The kind of vocational education in which I am interested is not one which

will ‘adapt’ workers to the existing industrial regime; I am not sufficiently in love with the regime for that.” Are we?

Who wants to attend school to learn to be “human capital”? Who aspires for their children to become economic or military resources? Dewey had a different vision. Given the pace of change, it is impossible (he noted in 1897) to know what the world will be like in a couple of decades, so schools first and foremost should teach us habits of learning.

For Dewey, these habits included awareness of our interdependence; nobody is an expert on everything. He emphasized “plasticity,” an openness to being shaped by experience: “The inclination to learn from life itself and to make the conditions of life such that all will learn in the process of living is the finest product of schooling.”

The inclination to learn from life can be taught in a liberal arts curriculum, but also in schools that focus on real-world skills, from engineering to nursing. The key is to develop habits of mind that allow students to keep learning, even as they acquire skills to get things done. This combination will serve students as individuals, family members and citizens — not just as employees and managers.

Higher education faces stark challenges: the ravaging of public universities’ budgets by strained state and local governments; ever rising tuition and student debt; inadequate student achievement; the corrosive impact of soaring inequality; and the neglect by some elite institutions of their core mission of teaching undergraduates.

But these problems, however urgent, should not cause us to neglect Dewey’s insight that learning in the process of living is the deepest form of freedom. In a nation that aspires to democracy, that’s what education is primarily for: the cultivation of freedom within society. We should not think of schools as garrisons protecting us from enemies, nor as industries generating human capital. Rather, higher education’s highest purpose is to give all citizens the opportunity to find “large and human significance” in their lives and work.

Michael S. Roth, the president of Wesleyan University, is the author, most recently, of “Memory, Trauma and History: Essays on Living With the Past.”