

*On
What It Means
To Be*

AN EDUCATED PERSON

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INTRODUCING INTO your class the matter of the Educated Person has not, in fact, been suggested because it will create educated persons. Full academic careers, ending in caps and gowns, can only dare to aspire to that achievement; more often it takes a decades beyond the academy to arrive at something like a repletely educated state – and too often, for many reasons, the full fruit of learning never ripens at all. A single theme, in a single first-year course, will go happier without the pretensions.

Rather the cause for including this course material is preparatory: at best to lay down chalk lines for the education that follows. This would be done with the assumption, as hopeful as it is fair, that every one of your students will become an educated person. Broadly, then, each should be made aware of the expectations of what educated persons have and what educated persons do. Such expectations, after all, are precisely your students' to hold. It is what they have the right to expect.

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What Defines an Educated Person?

There is no secure consensus on the answer to this question. To the contrary, for most of the past century it has been a prize of debate within and without academia. Research has been invested, curricula refashioned, pedagogy reversed, and institutions founded for the sake of proposed answers. Our chore is not so brazen.

Nor should our chore be taken as an imposition. As the instructor of your class, your own understanding of what makes for an educated person is not only to be valued, it is necessary and asked for. The overriding reason for the absent consensus is that answering the question entails values that could only be individually held. It might even be said, playfully, that among the earmarks of the species is an obdurate refusal to allow anyone else to define what it is that makes them educated. It can further be assured that the great benefit of your own understanding is that it will, by its example, inspire your students to arrange for their own understandings, as naturally they must.

Nevertheless, if the answers must remain imprecise the structure of the inquiry need not be. To be sure, this makes for uncertain ground, and it needs a light tread. But this inquiry is an open speculation. As such, caution is what permits risk not what deters it. That beauty, for example, must be determined individually does not vitiate

the study of aesthetics; likewise there are common and comparable elements in most useful attempts in describing what it is to be an educated person. [For more on aesthetics, please see the last segment: *An Awareness of Moral Involvement*.]

We would like to offer you the following seven attributes. They are for your attention, for your interest and for your own critical examination:

- a balanced mind
- an awareness of the relatedness of learning
- an awareness of history
- an awareness of cultural influence
- an awareness of the role of reason
- an awareness of the roles of language
- and an awareness of moral involvement

These have been listed not in order of importance, but merely for the convenience of their description. And by no means are they meant to comprise a complete catalog of the assets of an educated person. They are a beginning and not more. You are welcome to add to their number, subtract from their number, rearrange, refine and redefine.

A Balanced Mind

There are several ways to describe what is meant by a balanced mind. The phrase itself, though potent, is generously used (as for that matter is “an unbalanced mind”). This leads to plentiful leeway or plentiful murkiness, depending on one’s taste. In either case, too many meanings can be as worrisome as having no meaning at all, and an effort to rethink the idea of a mental equilibrium seemed in order.

What is provided here is a scheme that tries to isolate what is the essential equipment of a strong, supple mind and, secondly, tries to compose those points in a plausible and functional arrangement. That is to say, it tries to make internal and external sense.

Mindful of the steadiness of a tripod, our model proposes a three-way balance between:

- ▼ a *basis* of HUMILITY
- ▼ an *approach* of CONFIDENCE
- ▼ a *manner* of RIGOR

Humility provides the only honest grounding for an educated person. With it comes salutary doubt, an openness to experience,

and a willingness to stand corrected. It is also what makes honesty easy.

Confidence is the rightful bearing of an educated person, and with it the inquisitiveness to seek and the nerve to risk perhaps improbable ideas. As well, it is what keeps a mind hammering against problems that do not resolve themselves quickly – as no truly first-rate problem ever does.

And rigor provides the means to temper the acquisition of knowledge. With it comes the verifications, with it comes systematic development. And with it comes that most crucial gift: a very patient ear for the ring of truth.

To take them in their combinations:

Humility and confidence, together, provide the seedbed for curiosity – easily the greatest boon for any learning mind. Allied, they make the condition of ignorance feel like a delightful puzzle. But without rigor the pair can be prone to frivolousness. And humility, by itself, too often falls prey to notions. Unsupported, it is gullible.

Confidence and rigor, together, can make for boldness of venture and a veritable locomotive of intellectual development. But, without humility, their partnership often veers toward the rigidity and an ideological fix. And confidence, in isolation, will notoriously produce bombast.

Rigor and humility, together, make for precise and clarified learning, with craftsman’s results that are highly secure. But, without confidence, they can easily get bogged in timidity. And rigor, all alone, will at last induce a dispirited and uninterested outlook.

But bring the three together – humility, confidence and rigor – and allow their inclinations to be mutually oppositional, and those same inclinations will also become mutually supportive (as the way soldiers once leaned three rifles against each other to form a stack). Something generative and self-correcting results: call it a balance of mind.

Every field of knowledge encourages this naturally. Each can have its preferred epistemic method, whether it is through mathematical proofs or textual analyses, by ensemble critique or by field tests, or otherwise, or in combinational varieties. Disciplines will also differ in arranging for an optimal mixture of preparation and practice. Just as sprinters and marathoners will have physiques distinctly conditioned for – and by – their events, so the attributes of humility, confidence and rigor will tend to vary in their applied ratio. There is no one best

balance.

FOR DISCUSSION:

Are there examples of humility, confidence and rigor that specially pertain to your discipline? Is there a consequent relationship between these polar virtues that your discipline promotes?

An Awareness of the Relatedness of Learning

It is a misunderstanding that tries to divide scholars into generalists and specialists. We vary in how narrowly or how widely we care to, or need to, set a focus within our domains; that is true. But very few of us are actually assigned by nature to be monomaniacs, and even fewer to be jacks-of-all-trades. Most of us situate ourselves somewhere in between. Time and energy are finite, and the demands of any discipline are as infinite as anyone is willing to permit; but the overwhelming run of humankind tend toward multiple enthusiasms. Intellectually, we are all at least a little nomadic. The active question is not really how broadly we each rove, but how sensibly we find associations between our various attentions. Whether we know these as vocations or hobbies, pastimes or second careers, is not immediately important. Rather it is the connections forged between them that make for a particularly educated outlook. Viewed honestly, nothing that attracts a mind should ever, entirely, be considered a distraction.

The way to enter this web is by beginning at home, beginning within your own field. Every discipline has its own domain knowledge: the facts; the theories; the habits of mind; the skills, and perhaps the values as well; the great questions answered and the great questions yet to be answered – perhaps inklings of the future too. This would be the defining heart of your studies, and imparting it is the central purpose of a curriculum.

Moving outwardly, every branch of human inquiry, however defined, has its immediate neighbors. Indeed it tends to be propinquity that does the defining; what constrains also distinguishes, and the way any one field edges on another is revealing. Where does electrical engineering end and computer science begin? Where lies the frontier between digital media and graphic design? Between literature and journalism? Economics and finance? There are answers to these questions and the purpose, here, is not to encourage border skirmishing or to disparage the academic divisions. The point is to

note that every student should be aware not only of what makes their major what it is, but also what it is not, and why.

Remember now that departmental courses will seldom represent more than two-thirds of a degree track's ultimate credit load. All university students are subject to the UMass System's General Education Requirements, which demand an exposure to categories of subjects that may claim to represent a universal canon of education: mathematics, literature, the physical sciences and so forth. It is, however, left to them, the students, to perform the needed assimilation; beyond assertion, no course or instructor is obliged to explain how or why the various categories of Gen-Ed entwine and support each other, nor how they bear upon studies in your discipline.

Yet surely they all do relate. All belong to a larger project: that of expanding the capacities and enhancing the fulfillment of every individual human life (indeed, and if you prefer, of all life – of all existence, if you are bold for it). Conversely, a discipline that cannot even in vague terms aspire to a purpose beyond itself is a mean and sorry thing.

This larger project needn't be called "civilization" or "progress." It needn't be named at all. But every educated person becomes aware, at some stage in time, that a narrow, domain-bound understanding of education also denies learning of justification and inhibits its satisfactions. Furthermore it is hard to defend. For however various and peculiar our minds are, they are very much more alike than they are different. There must, correspondingly, be common ancestry in the products of our minds. How better to explain the fungibility of nearly all skills, conceptual or physical – that they can successfully be used in alternative conditions for alternative purposes?

FOR DISCUSSION:

How do the General Education Requirements bear upon your discipline? How would you describe the way your discipline contributes to something beyond itself?

An Awareness of History

The ability to align the events of history, and their developmental sequences, is integral to an educated mind. Without a general capacity to make sense of the past, the present is nonsensical and the unfolding future, whatever it brings, will have no context.

That much is taken as commonplace. It is more interesting to observe is that hardly any person in fact lives without a sense of the present and without some context for the future. Evidently, then, most all persons do have at least a loosely intelligible sense of history, or at least enough to be able to conduct lives that are not framed by debilitating anxiety, dissociation and absurdity. [In its basic explanatory function, a feeling for history is usually a part of one's cultural inheritance; please see *An Awareness of Cultural Influence* directly below.] Vaguely and so very often competitively, we are nearly all willing to take comfort that history is on our side.

But if this basic role is granted, the potential of history is only rarely engaged. In all too many cases a person's historical knowledge is – although intelligible – also crude, disproportionate and not nearly accurate or expansive enough to provide anything more than that simple orientating explanation. An educated person knows more stringent uses for history. First as a kind of intellectual trellis that provides a structural support for knowledge as it grows. With this support learning becomes more secure, and with this support the currents of different societies, cultures, actions and ideas can be associated and, through association, made sensible. Secondly, history serves as an open dossier of human conduct, capability and folly. For it is, in its own way, the character of our species revealed. In its events, and equally in the choices and interpretations of those events, we can come to know ourselves.

Such purposes ask for a historical grasp that has greater detail, greater breadth and greater accuracy. Indeed, the better one's understanding of history the more its explanatory sweep becomes tutored by its finer details. In almost every historical particular, qualifications and contradictions emerge (citing a flagrant example, the witch trials of “The Age of Enlightenment”). It can surely be said that the premier lesson of history is that its lessons are seldom simple, and never are they absolute. Complexity is the rule, and the ability to abide complexity is the student of history's first essential skill. It is as well an essential attribute of an educated person.

For all its intricacy, though, history retains a specially direct appeal. Indeed it is just because of the intricacy – those branchings and criss-crossings – that history is the most accessible of all the critical disciplines. One can begin anywhere, enter at any point (even the present); wherever one begins, the pathways lead everywhere else. All that is

asked for is stamina. For stamina all that is required is interest. And, for interest, all that is needed is an awareness of history's unfailing pertinence. It always applies.

FOR DISCUSSION:

How does general history and your discipline's particular history entwine? How are a historian's skills used in your field?

An Awareness of Cultural Influence

Everybody enters the world in a state of ignorance. The first task in life, starting in the cradle, is to figure out the way things are: how the world we have entered operates; what is important, what is not; what is to be expected; and, most critically, the way other people act and respond. This is a little like being enlisted into a game without first being made aware of either its purpose or its rules. Fortunately for us all, human children are brilliant at managing this predicament. They watch, they listen, and they mimic very well.

What children absorb is, of course, culture: the way things are whenever and wherever they have entered the world. The theme is a wide one. Culture includes, but is not restricted to, social conventions. Nearly every parental injunction, nearly every peer influence, and nearly every product of mass media will also contribute to a person's cultural sensibility. In its totality the effects can be vast.

To offer an example, growing hair is not a cultural affair (it is genetically determined), but the *way* persons wear their hair always is. Be it long, short, thatched, banged, bobbed, butched or dreadlocked, tinted or bleached, curled or moussed, braided or ponytailed – however a person wears their hair is a matter of culture. It is perfectly inescapable. Even shaving one's hair off has its meanings, meanings that will be well known to everyone else who grew up at the same time and in the same place. Food, clothing, terms of address; legal and political forms; art, literature, music and dance: each similarly feeds off and feeds into culture.

Having noted its mechanism, though, is not necessarily to notice the mechanism's effects. These are famously difficult to read. One is not usually aware of one's cultural inheritance until some circumstance arrives to violate its bearing. Indeed, if a particular person never travels far, and no emissary from a separate culture ever comes to visit, there is a likelihood that culture will remain, for that person,

entirely invisible. In this consideration it is useful to recall that, since at least the advent of agriculture, most humans have lived their full lives within walking distance of the places they were born. Traveling for the sake of pleasure is a recent phenomenon, and only among the wealthier nationals. The attendant cultural interchange is a recent phenomenon as well.

A second difficulty has to do with the nature of the mechanism itself. For though absorbing a culture is somewhat like learning a game as you play it, there is not in truth a game being played. There is no rulebook for living, nor is there a communally agreed purpose to life. Indeed there isn't actual membership to any culture. With this in mind the process of enculturation can, for all of its many beneficial outcomes, be seen to resemble a form of brainwashing (more forgivable, perhaps, in that the brainwashers were brainwashed in their turn). The word liberal in "the liberal arts" arose precisely because its study was meant to liberate a person from the thrall of culture – especially from the superstitions and prejudices that come bundled in its innocent absorption. For while there may not be a way to escape culture, there is a way to rid oneself of its tyranny: through noticing its effects and submitting them to reason.

FOR DISCUSSION:

How does culture bear upon your discipline; in what ways if at all? Might your discipline be said to have its own culture – its own tacitly provided and assumed understandings?

An Awareness of the Role of Reason

The term reason is often used interchangeably with rationality and logic. Rationality is generally taken as having to do with the proportionate assessment of things, and logic, in its formal practice, is a term better saved for the special hybrid of verbal and mathematical methodologies. Whereas reason's distinguishing claim lies in ascertaining reliable connections between causes and effects. Certainly, though, there is ample overlap between the three terms and between their meanings; they are meant to operate together. (A fourth term, "critical thinking," is now often used to take them all up in one sweep.)

The capacity to discern patterns of cause and effect is possibly one that is inborn in us, just as a matrix for language is possibly inborn in us (cause-and-effect indeed seems to follow from the noun-verb-predicate relationship [please see below: *An Awareness of the Roles*

of Language]). True or not, our ability to make sense of the world – even if we must spin nonsense to make sense of it – rests mainly on this knack. Our daily lives are typically filled with causal suppositions, attempts to explain the many incidents that at least momentarily bring us into confusion. More often than not, these speculations are brusque and meant only to immediately rid ourselves of any urge to involve our minds further (the classics are, "He must have gotten up out of the wrong side of bed" and of course, "The devil made me do it"). Life's mysteries are infinite, and confusion is not a pleasant state. We are usually grateful for any excuse to override it, close down the inquiry and walk on. Plausible or wildly implausible, that is what rationalizations provide.

Reason provides something more. It begins in the same intuitive fashion as a rationalization, but its examinations expand beyond the immediate concerns that have raised it. Reason's model insists that we consider every cause as another link's effect and every effect as another link's cause, very often enlarging the chain geometrically, as the branching of a tree. So, for every proposed cause-and-effect sequence, there must be equally cogent sequences that extend forward and backwards in the wider pedigree. This assumption demands that any proposed cause-and-effect relationship be compatible with other relationships that have proven trustworthy. By its method, reason constantly forces three healthy questions on us. The first is: What *other* cause might equally well – or in conjunction – explain this known effect? Secondly: What *other* effects could this proposed cause be expected to bring? And thirdly, by logical inference: If this relationship is true, what *else* must be true?

These questions not only test propositions, they also insist that a thinker remain flexible. For alternative propositions become, by potential, alternative solutions. So extending a causal sequence not only encourages the most probable relationship to emerge, it also lets us perceive the ways in which any solution will effect the larger circumstance. The importance of that should not be overlooked. It is vital to keep in mind that, just as one cause can be another cause's effect, so one problem's solution has an unsettling way of becoming the next problem.

And reason has a final and generous gift: through it we can discern the limitations of reason. The line that divides questions that are extraordinarily difficult to answer from those that are in fact impossible

to answer is not always apparent; and, where apparent, it is a line that moves as our ingenuity advances. Nevertheless, there is always an outermost edge. Our brains, no less than our hands and feet, are made for this Earth. Reason informs us not to expect celestial truths from reasoning.

Arriving at truth's mundane varieties should be taken as success enough. And, by itself, reason cannot guarantee us of even that. Sooner or later any chain of propositions must be brought, for its verification, to actual palpable experience (the scientific method being the gold standard for precisely this need). But reason does build consistency and cogency into thought's process. And, by exposing rationalizations and assumptions to its scrutiny, we can, each of us, take back the right of determining what is worth believing in and why it is worth it. Educated persons have taken back that right. Whatever else they possess, they own freedom of judgment. And whatever else an education is, it is never indoctrination.

FOR DISCUSSION:

How is reasoning applied in your discipline – what are its problems and how are they solved? What are the standards of trustworthiness in your discipline, its favored epistemology?

An Awareness of the Roles of Language

Language – be it written or verbal, numerical or ASL, musical or visual or in any form – is generally taken as the means with which humans communicate with one another (it works with and for other species as well). And this much it certainly does. But inter-communication isn't language's first and primary use. Language serves a prior function: it permits an individual to think clearly. Its codifications are no less than conceptual tokens, and thinking is, at its barest bones, the mental manipulation of concepts.

Fluency in a language is, in this construct, as much an achievement of generation as it is of expression: not just a matter of providing one's thoughts with a faithful account, but also of midwifing the thoughts in the first place. As such it follows from something yet more basic. The process of thought is at least a primitive form of conversation, one between the intuitive (if you like) and the more calculating sides of a person's mind. And language, when internalized, can provide a moderation for their internal dialogues. The more *fluent* the thinking the more lucid will be the thoughts.

But that internalization is required. A thesaurus does not make for a poet, a calculator does not make for a mathematician, and Garage Band will not make for a musician. If it is not engaged with thinking, if it is used only descriptively and not generatively, language never attains its fluent capacity. The educated person recognizes this, and recognizes that powers of articulation are basic to all the other powers of the mind.

Nothing in this understanding demotes the inter-communicative role of language to a lesser status. For it is seldom enough just to think. We are a voluble species to begin with; most persons lavishly share their thoughts. More pointedly, just as it is tremendously difficult to proof-read one's own writing, it is tremendously difficult, in isolation, to maintain cogency in one's own thinking; the same blind spots that caused the errors are the ones that will most certainly overlook them.

Conversation is the corrective. And the abilities to convey one's thoughts honestly, accurately and compellingly are essential to it. These powers perhaps come as a consequence of the original honesty, accuracy and power of one's thinking, but the importance of inter-communication is not diminished by that.

FOR DISCUSSION:

What are the languages of your discipline? How are they internalized and elevated to a condition of fluency?

An Awareness of Moral Involvement

An education proceeds in a least three ways at the same time. It broadens through the acquisition of knowledge; it brings complexity through ever-increasing associations between articles of knowledge; and it enhances a mind's sensitivity to its own responses – that is to say, an education will train a person's intuition. Different fields will place emphasis on one or another. But all fields educate in the three processes simultaneously, because minds learn in at least those three ways simultaneously.

The moral realm, which belongs to all education and all educated persons, advances largely on the third path, that of trained intuition. And, apart from its enormous importance to individual and community life, it serves as well as the model of that third process: what might be called aesthetic education.

An aesthetic education is derived not through accumulation but through enhancing sensitivity. Rather than organizing information, aesthetic discrimination grows by ever more keenly detecting the subtleties of one's responses to experience. In this it is subjective. Granting that, though, is not to hold aesthetic education as being opposed to an education that is based on the acquisition of objectively confirmed knowledge. The forms of learning are always meshed, just as intuition and calculation come together in the act of thinking [see above: *An Awareness of the Roles of Language*].

It is appropriate here to consider the distinction between morality and ethics. Ethics, a branch of philosophy, involves the application of logical reasoning to sets of proposed moral precepts. In its inquiry it seeks their interrelationships and their consequences. Ethics also looks for rational ways to derive those precepts and to organize the values that prompt them.

At its source, though, moral feeling is only modestly susceptible to intellectual participation, for at its source morality is itself seldom a rational function. Its basis tends instead to be that of an aesthetic reaction: a response to beauty – or ugliness – that is found in human behavior and human intent (here we should not impose on other species). Whereas ethics comes with the dimensions and the criteria that are fit to its study, morality is probably better understood as an aspect of everyday personal experience.

With that qualified, it should also be noticed that our moral sensibilities are nearly always modeled, initially, by the cultural climate we each happened to have grown up within [please see above: *An Awareness of Cultural Influence*]. Our first moral understandings are roughed out by cultural mores – giving us the points, so to speak, of a moral compass. From that basis, though, those understandings are subsequently in a condition of constant adaptation; they are always being calibrated by the many reinforcing or contradicting stimulations commonly found in life. And these do abound. Morality's realm is a wide one; it has nearly limitless subjects for its considerations. These can be found wherever human purpose is engaged, beginning naturally within oneself.

In their manner the varieties of aesthetic education are alike, with the moral operating no differently than the musical – to invoke another cultural legacy. Just as we refine our “ears” through exposure and attention, so our moral faculty becomes refined by exposure and attention. Just as we discover nuances of timbre and tempo, so we discover

nuances of charity and selfishness. And just as such conditioning can sometimes distance us from a once-loved melody, so we typically shed the easy righteousness of our younger years. The only consequential difference is that musical appreciation is cultivated exclusively for delight; free people are never required to dance to music they do not enjoy, nor is anyone obligated to expand on tastes that were acquired in childhood, be they musical or artistic, culinary or sartorial. Moral sense, on the other hand, should never be left stunted.

Certainly we must all apply as much ethical guidance as can be borne on our own moral concerns, and reason will always be needed to discern the potential outcomes of our potential actions. But the first important step is only to be watchful, to observe those moral concerns as they arise. The second important step is to observe our responses to those concerns, to notice the qualities of their feeling and their force. With sufficient and careful observation, sensitivity develops almost on its own.

Not that it is easy business because of that. Unlike charming music, morality does not always propose to make our lives more comfortable. On the contrary, it often forces on us agonies we might have preferred to have slept through. That is precisely why watchfulness is the key.

FOR DISCUSSION:

What moral and ethical issues are central to your discipline? Are there aspects of aesthetic development that your discipline would naturally involve?

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Lastly it remains to restate a famous truth: learning is indeed a life-long activity. Whatever being an educated person means, it cannot mean that the task of learning has been completed and there is nothing left to do.

To begin, there is always something left to do. As the essayist Richard Mitchell once noted, no matter how much knowledge a person may acquire, the sum of that knowledge is necessarily finite. At the same time – and regardless of the size of that storehouse – the sum of the items that have been left unlearned must remain necessarily infinite; there is no encyclopedia to hold the universe. We may differ in the quantity of attained knowledge, but all of us, at all times, can honestly be said to be equally ignorant. Every educated person

openly admits to it.

But by any reckoning, though, learning is not really a task – or surely not the way taking out the trash and writing term papers are tasks. Nor is it like a journey, though the metaphor is frequently raised; at least it is difficult to recognize learning in the passive forms of tourism. Rather the more closely one looks at it, the nearer learning seems to be a fundamental compulsion of our minds, one that is as natural as it is enjoyable, and one that is almost impossible to brake. Exhaustion and routine do take their toll; as does anxiety; as can cultural influences. But for most of us learning will indeed prove to be a terminal state, as there is every likelihood that its compulsion will remain active for as long as our minds remain alive.

Until that end, the abiding concern of an educated person is not *if* but always *how to learn best*.