

WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH EDUCATION?

BY

WILLIAM GEORGE JORDAN

PUBLISHED IN THE MAR 1923 OF *THE FORUM*

EDITED BY
RODNEY W MANN
AUGUST 2011

THE FIRST IN A SERIES OF FOUR ARTICLES ON EDUCATION

WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH EDUCATION

BY WILLIAM GEORGE JORDAN, MARCH 1923



SOMETIME in the years of the future we shall look back on the education system of the twentieth century with the same feeling of revulsion as we now regard the superstitions of the Middle Ages. These are hard words but they are calmly and deliberately chosen. They would be insanely foolish and wantonly unjust if not substantiated by proof. They would be incendiary, useless and dangerously unsettling were no better way provided. There is a better way, there is a new model.

The failure of education is not limited to America; it extends over the whole civilized world. The most vital problem before humanity today is a true system of education, for it is only as we train individuals and peoples to think, to use their minds and all their other powers to their highest efficiency that we shall find any adequate solution of our other problems, mental, moral, social, political, economic and industrial. We are failing miserably to solve them today because we have not been able to bring the trained minds of a trained people to bear upon them. We have been relying on the trained minds of a few leaders to carry and control the mass.

This is a deeply personal question to every individual. It determines the character of the world in which he lives, his own living and that of his children and all those dear to him. We are all going through life on but a small percentage of the mental powers that should be ours. Even our senses, through which all the raw material of thought enters the mind, are not only absolutely untrained but actually weak, dull, drugged and deadened. How can we think, remember, judge, reason and imagine with clearness and force when the very impressions upon which the mind works are blurred, confused and imperfect? How can we expect to have clear expression unless we begin with clear impression? There is not one single power, faculty, process or quality of the mind that is trained and developed by our present system of education. Our powers are not merely untrained—they are positively mistrained.

For centuries our ablest thinkers have criticized and condemned the process of education. The severe criticisms written hundreds of years ago are as apt, pertinent and up-to-date as though they had just appeared in this morning's paper. Swedenborg¹, over two centuries ago, said: "*As the strength of a man's body depends upon his digestive powers and not on the size of his stomach, so also it is with the mind of man. It is not the cramming of his mental stomach, of his memory, with all sorts of knowledge that makes him an intelligent man and a rational man, but it is his mode of digesting his knowledge.*" James A. Froude² said: "*To cram a man's mind with infinite names of things which he never handled, places he never saw or will see, statements of fact which he cannot possibly understand and must remain merely words to him – this, in my opinion, is like loading his stomach with marbles.*" These are but typical of what

¹ **Emanuel Swedenborg** (January 29, 1688 – March 29, 1772) was a Swedish scientist, philosopher, Christian mystic and theologian. Swedenborg had a prolific career as an inventor and scientist before embarking on path of spiritual studies and writings.

² **James Anthony** (23 April 1818–20 October 1894) was an English historian, novelist, biographer, and editor of Fraser's Magazine (a general and literary journal published in London from 1830 to 1882).

William George Jordan

hundreds of thinkers have said through the centuries, yet the degenerating process goes on, not only unchecked, but intensified. It is worse, because we are giving more.

While the evil of the system is recognized in varying degrees we have failed to change it because we have not perfectly diagnosed the nature and seat of the disease. We have over-emphasized details not seen the problem as a whole. We have been treating symptoms not discovering the basic cause. We have ever assumed that somehow, despite its failings, it was sound organically, right in principle. We have ever assumed that if we cut out the cramming, secured a higher grade of teachers, divorced it from politics, lengthened or shortened the course, changed the method of teaching this or that study, by introducing new studies or curtailing old ones, by some patching, tinkering or modifying, we could make the machine run beautifully. We have had countless wise and sane educational suggestions, excellent in themselves, yet they have failed to produce expected results. It has been as hopeless as trying to graft a living shoot on an artificial plant.

We have not had the courage to challenge the basic theory of education, the very foundation principle of the colossal, complicated and antiquated model itself. We have had much destructive criticism of details, but not the clear vision of the intrinsic and organic weakness of the present model and that constructive criticism which would set forth the general lines of a new model in accord with which our system of today could gradually, effectively and progressively be remodeled. Unless we can see and realize the real cause of the failure, we can never transform that failure into success. This one fundamental weakness of our educational system is that it is erected on the rotten foundation of a false theory. All the evils and failings of education in the elementary school, the high school and the college, whether in what it does or in what it leaves undone is directly traceable to its hopelessly wrong basic error in principle. The theory of education, not as we get it from the ideals of educators but as it is evidenced in every detail of the system as it actually exists today, can be given in a single sentence:

Education believes that by forcing a certain amount of knowledge, principally by means of textbooks, into the minds of children, that somehow in the divine mystery of mental processes this knowledge will not only be retained, but the mind of the individual will be exercised, trained and developed.

Education makes the acquiring of knowledge the main effort and training the mind a by-product. She does not prepare the mind for learning nor directly attempt to train mental powers. The true method is diametrically opposed to this. It makes the training and exercising of every power process, faculty or quality of mind the first and supreme aim, and the acquiring of knowledge secondary. The trained mind absorbs knowledge, acquires and retains it, but mere knowledge does not give a trained mind.

Suppose a gardener were to take a plot of ground, and, without turning up the soil, preparing it or fertilizing it or doing anything to put it in good condition he were to plant it with seed of all kinds, covering every inch of the plot. Suppose that he then said: *“This process will of itself enrich the soil and will produce beautiful flowers,”* we should think he had suddenly lost his reason. Because he did not first care for the soil and prepare it for the seed we would know that because of his wrong method he would accomplish neither of his claims, he would neither enrich

What's the Matter with Education?

the soil nor produce fine flowers, the soil would be unimproved and the plants poor, stunted, scrawny failures. Such a theory is not a whit more senseless and imbecile than the theory of our educational system.

The theory of training the mind first and making knowledge secondary, because it is right and sound as a principle gives both mental power and knowledge. Education, because of her wrong principle, gives neither. She fails in both. The knowledge rammed into the mind of a child is neither assimilated nor retained and the mind instead of being quickened and rendered live, active and alert is actually chloroformed, dulled and deadened by stuffing and over-loading it with what it cannot digest.

The new ideal making the exercise of the whole mind its first purpose would incidentally give more real vital brain-building knowledge than the encyclopedic mess given today. It would be useful, usable knowledge, understood and digested, that would feed and nourish the powers of the mind, stimulate them, call forth their activities. It would be such knowledge first as would illuminate for the child the life around it, that would interpret it and be constantly used in his everyday living and would lead the child to clearer thinking and greater wisdom.

This direct and positive reversal of our present educational theory would transform education. It would substitute a right way for a wrong way, a natural method and process for one that is arbitrary and artificial. It would change the ideals, the attitude, the atmosphere, the spirit and method of teaching. Education would be a joy to the child and to the older student instead of a long, dreary, painful process. What was learned would at once become part of one's thinking and would be a constant inspiration throughout the whole later life of the individual. He would carry into business and all of the other phases and activities of his living the principles and powers in which he had been trained. With our present system—except for what we have learned of reading, writing and arithmetic—we put practically all our education behind us, on passing our final examinations, as if it were a long spell of sickness we were seeking to forget.

We have charged education first with failure to give knowledge that is retained. The proof of the justness and fairness of this charge is simple. From our earliest school years we have had constantly dinned into our ears the “*value*” of what we were learning. Under the hypnotic spell of constant reiteration we somehow believed that in some occult way it must be true but we could not know it was true. At our college graduation we heard something like this: “*Gentlemen, you are now leaving these classic halls of learning, hallowed with memories and associations that will be forever dear to you. You have acquired knowledge that will be of great value to you in the battle of life. Full panoplied³ with wisdom, with high ideals and clear vision, with trained minds and conscious power you are now prepared to enter on your life-work.*”

This is sheer buncombe⁴ that would be humorous if it were not tragic. There is no one of these statements that is not absolutely false to the fact. We have been fooled and duped as certainly

³ **Panoply** 1576, from Gk. panoplia “complete suit of armor,” from pan- “all” + hopla (pl.) “arms” of a hoplites (“heavily armed soldier”). Originally fig., of “spiritual armor,” etc. (allusion to Eph. vi); non-armorial sense of “any splendid array” first recorded 1829. *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Douglas Harper, Historian. 31 Aug. 2011. Dictionary.com

⁴ **Buncombe** — *n* 1. empty talk; nonsense 2. chiefly (*US*) empty or insincere speechmaking by a politician to please voters or gain publicity

William George Jordan

and thoroughly as if it were all done with direct conscious intent. Hardly has a student completed any textbook or any study, hardly has two weeks elapsed before he has to cram on it anew to get a superficial, temporary veneer of knowledge to carry him through an examination. This vaunted knowledge which was to be "*of great value in the battle of life*" cannot stand the strain of a two weeks evaporation. A year or two later the student could not get a ten percent marking if re-examined.

Education knows this to be true. Every teacher and professor knows it to be true. Every student vaguely realizes it and yet the same ghastly farce goes on, year after year, with millions of children in countless thousands of schools. We have sold the birthright of our golden years of possibility for a mess of undigested facts, unassimilated shreds of information, distorted perceptions, confused and unrelated ideas and vague memories that education irreverently calls "*knowledge*."

The one great proof of the indestructibility of the human mind is that it somehow survives its education. When we go out into the world we manage to get along somehow; we turn as best we can to the natural use of the powers of the mind, but we are sadly handicapped because we have never been taught how to train them or develop them. What we are does not measure up to what we are capable of being or what we should be. If we succeed in life, it is in spite of our education, not because of it.

As to the boast of Education that she trains the mind, this is as empty and false as her claim to give lasting knowledge. We have blindly trusted her promises; we have paid her price in years of effort but she has not delivered the goods. She not only does not do this but it would be impossible for her to do it by her present methods.

Does she train the senses? The kindergarten goes a few steps when it is necessary to go leagues. Does she train consciously and directly the student's perception, so that it is easy, rapid, comprehensive, certain, efficient? Does she train his observation so that he may think properly of what he sees and hears and make his own instant deductions? Does she train his reasoning so that he may think out clearly and soundly the problems of his life and the manifold impressions that come to him? Does she train his memory for faces, for names, for dates, for locations, for events? Does she train his judgment, his will, his self-control? Does she directly exercise his imagination, train it and show him how he may train it still further and keep it under the control of will and guided by reason?

Does she give him an appreciation of the good, the beautiful and the true and develop in him a taste for the finest, a love for the best? Does she give him a strong virile vocabulary in his native tongue, ever at his control, with knowledge of how to increase and strengthen it? Does she thrill the individual with the vision of her possibility, start his mind tingling and aglow with the joy of his having a mind whose weakness he can transform and whose strength he can increase because he knows "*how*," because he has had every mental muscle massaged by exercises that have made them supple, instantly and instinctively responsive to need? Does she exercise him in thoroughness, accuracy and rapidity in mental processes and in the performance of every task that his hand touches? Does she train him in clear consecutive thinking? Does she train his mind, along the line of principle, so that he can apply it in concentration to any subject at will, so

What's the Matter with Education?

that he is a better workman, a better farmer, a better business man, a better scientist, a better citizen, better in any line and most important of all—better as a whole man?

The answer to every one of these questions is “*No.*” What then becomes of the constant claim of Education that she trains the mind?

One instance may be given that is typical of the whole system of education. A child is told to learn a verse of six lines or so, but he is never told “*how*” to learn them. Left to himself, he sings the lines aloud, over and over, with no thought of their meaning and relation, until they make a sufficient impression to last until the next day when he is “*heard.*” Because the lines are not taken into the mind in the right way they are not long retained nor is the mind itself trained. A second verse, and all succeeding verses, is learned with equal difficulty. There is no increment of power, no mental growth. So is it in every study. A child finds each new class as difficult as the one he left, showing that the mind itself has acquired no fresh, keen, cutting edge. We do not learn the right way by mere doing; we must be trained and exercised in the right way. We all breathe and we all walk, but few be they that breathe and walk correctly.

When we ask Education why she forces young boys and girls through algebra, geometry, trigonometry and higher mathematics, which most of them detest and which 95 percent will never use and which the five percent or so could get better as part of a professional course, she smiles in a superior, patronizing way and says: “*I give them these to develop their powers of reasoning.*” If Education really believes this—and the fallacy of this claim can be exploded in a dozen ways—why, when the student has completed his course in mathematics, does she not examine him in reasoning? Imagine a physician having administered medicine to allay a fever being perfectly satisfied with the fact that the patient had taken the dose and later making no temperature test to see if the fever has been allayed. Education is so obsessed with her fetish worship of the power of mere knowledge that she makes no test for effects. She is satisfied if an examination reveals that a certain percentage of her mathematics medicine still remains in the system.

We decry forced feeding in our prisons, why do we tolerate it in our schools? What would we think of setting a child at a table and forcing him under fear of punishment to “*eat everything on its plate*” for four or five hours of continuous feeding a day, day after day for years? It would seem inhuman cruelty. Nature would revolt. Society and the law would suppress it. It would in reality however be no worse than the enforced mental feeding of our schools. Children are today over-fed and under-nourished. They may grow mentally fat but not mentally strong. Physical food is of value to the body only as it is digested. What remains unassimilated, acts as a poison on the body, enervating, dulling and deadening physical processes. Mental food is of value only as it is digested. The vast mass of what the mind cannot digest acts as a mental poison, clogging, dulling, drugging and deadening thinking and all other mental processes.

In education, the child, it is true, is often told to use his reasoning, his observation, his concentration, his imagination or some other power but he is never exercised in using them nor trained in “*how*” to use them. The child does not even comprehend the meaning of the terms. They are but mere words that he cannot translate into any clear idea.

William George Jordan

The public school system of America costs the staggering sum of over a thousand million dollars a year. This is what this education takes, what does it give? The sole test of this is—results. We care nothing for the earnestness of Education, her intent, her purpose, her loyal teachers, what she claims to do or what she tries to do, the one test is—results. What does she give the boyar girl who has passed through her courses and fulfilled her requirements? In what respect does she prepare them for life? To what degree does she train their minds? Education “*examines*” millions, let the millions now turn and “*examine*” Education, question her as to how she has acquitted herself of her sacred trusteeship.

Over a million children graduate every year from the elementary schools of the country, ready to enter high school. For the greater part of this vast army, their school days are now ended and they must now face their life problems and earn their own livings. They have given the best years of their lives, their formative years to Education, what has she given to them? A few questions recently asked by the writer are worth restating here. They are vital, fair, honest questions. They seek to determine what *one* single power, faculty, quality or process is common to these children or even to a majority of them. Aside from the ability to read, write and cipher in a way, what do they possess in common as the results of eight years of study? Pause a moment after each question, think, and then answer it for yourself. It is a most serious questionnaire for every parent in the land.

Can they breathe, sit, stand, walk or run correctly? Have their senses been trained and developed? Can they add up a column of figures, rapidly, accurately and with certainty? Can they write the simplest letter, properly penned, spelled and punctuated, with a few ideas, properly expressed? Can they spell and define the simple everyday words? Can they work out simple problems in addition, subtraction, multiplication and division, mentally? Can they read aloud pleasingly, well and with confidence? Can they speak the English language correctly? Have they a love of reading? Have they a hunger for knowledge? Have they ideals, aims or purposes worthwhile? Has their character been developed? Do they articulate clearly? Have their memories for faces, names or dates been trained? Have they developed powers of observation? Have they a sense of their duties and responsibilities as citizens? Have they a highly developed moral sense? Do they know enough about books to enable them to discover knowledge for themselves? Have they pleasing manners, courtesy and consideration? Have they a sense of duty and responsibility? Has their appreciation of the fine and the beautiful been exercised and developed? Have they initiative? Have they power of concentration? Have they self-control developed or increased by their education? Have they minds quick to take in new ideas?

These are but typical of some of the elementary things that education should give. The one answer to all these questions so far as they apply to a common power or quality as applied to the children as a whole is “*No.*” What can education answer to this?

The failure is not due to the teachers, it is the fault of the system. Even if we had in the schools of any great city, the best teachers on earth they could do little or nothing to better conditions. The system would force them to get a textbook into a child's mind in so many weeks, with every moment of the time divided, assigned, scheduled like a factory to produce a certain amount in a

What's the Matter with Education?

given time, to jam and cram a fixed amount of knowledge in the brain of the child and most of which is useless to it and unused by it, no teacher has time for real training. If she tried it she would probably be called down or fired for dislocating the machinery.

The high schools complain of the poor material passed on to them by the elementary schools; the college protests against the poor brand of brains it receives. Both elementary and high schools complain of the pressure forced on them by the demands of college entrance examinations and so the vicious circle continues. The failure of education is due not to anyone of these but to all three, they are alike in that they are based on the same false theory. Scattered over the country we have many privately owned schools, headed by clear-minded, able, zealous men and women working out educational problems on big, sane, natural lines, in accord with a definite ideal and method. They are seeking to train rather than merely to “*educate*” but even they are limited and hampered because their curriculum is forced to conform to college requirements for entrance.

In this presentation of the failure of education we have been forced to limit ourselves to its purely intellectual side, its relation to knowledge gathered from text books. But even if this succeeded, it would be but a poor inadequate preparation for life. It takes no account of the training of character, the training for citizenship and the larger duties, relations and responsibilities of the individual as will be shown in later articles in this series. With drastic cuts in our present curriculum, we can conform the present system to accord with the new ideal, the new method, the new inspiration and the new model. Great reforms are rarely started within any body or institution, they are forced on it by pressure from without. The American public and the press need first to be aroused and kindled into protest against the failure of our present education. This situation demands not mere talk, but action.

A little over a century and a half ago Laurence Sterne⁵ wrote in *Tristram Shandy*⁶: “*I am convinced, Yorick,*” continued my father, half-reading, half-discoursing, “*that there is a Northwest Passage to the intellectual world, and that the soul of man has shorter ways of going to work, in furnishing itself with knowledge and instruction than we generally take with it.*” There is a Northwest Passage. It will be found in a sane, practical system of education that will train men for the seven varieties of life they all live, a system based on the finest working of mind—that is genius. It means a new idea, a new ideal, a new inspiration, a new method and a new model.

⁵ **Laurence Sterne** (24 November 1713 – 18 March 1768) was an Anglo-Irish novelist and an Anglican clergyman. He is best known for his novels *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, and *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy*; but he also published many sermons, wrote memoirs, and was involved in local politics.

⁶ **Tristram Shandy** is a fictitious autobiography that was published in 9 volumes over the course of 10 years beginning in 1759.