

GUEST EDITORIAL

It's Time To End The Old Distinction Between Vocational And Academic Education

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Once upon a time, we could make a distinction between "educating for making a living" and "education for life."

The liberal arts and the humanities—education for life—helped us live our lives well and decently. Liberal studies also trained our minds to think creatively and imaginatively. A liberal arts education was meant to train us in critical thinking. They were an exercise in seeing patterns, in understanding the different ways of looking at the same event, or in grasping the creative possibilities broadened by the very strictures that might seem to limit them.

Education for making a living, on the other hand, was what used to be called the commercial arts, the technical arts, a curriculum designed to help us find the kinds of jobs that often put a value on adherence to limits rather than the ability to manipulate or transcend them.

Today, it is often said that we live in the "information age" and people are "information workers." Perhaps it would be better to say that our information economy has blurred the old definitions of thinker and doer, creating everyone new as manager, entrepreneur, and creative deci-

sion maker. Today, people are expected to have the flexibility to take on a multitude of tasks, to approach unforeseen exigencies with clever solutions, and to constantly improve the product; in short, to be information workers.

A recipe for disaster: we hear a renewed call for "career-oriented" curricula in high schools. The National Association of Scholars recently issued a proposal for reforming secondary education that would ask entering ninth-graders to select one of two tracks of study: a "subject-centered" curriculum (similar to the college prep courses of old) and a "career-oriented" curriculum (similar to the old commercial course or vocational education but reflecting jobs generated by the new technology). It is a recipe for disaster for our economy, our national culture, and our students' futures.

As the pace of technological change accelerates, the very jobs at which such specific training is aimed will be disappearing as well—those of us who are still struggling with our VCR's have felt the breeze of DVDs, DVRs, and podcasting passing us by. We may soon well be receiving three-dimensional interactive entertainment via chips implanted directly in our brains.

This applies not only to the technical careers, but to business as well. TiVo and similar services are about to render obsolete the traditional advertising executive, and the New York Stock Exchange trading floor may well be housed entirely on a CPU chip within our lifetimes.

History repeating: recall that the very notion of vocational education has its roots in the early part of the 20th century, when the "line jobs" meant assembly lines. In *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms*, the highly regarded scholar Diane Ravitch noted that, around the time of World War I, education reformers decided an academic curriculum for all students was not "socially efficient."

And so was born the junior high school—or intermediate school, or middle school—where youngsters would be guided into a track based on evaluations made possible by the burgeoning science of intelligence testing. At about age 13, students decided, or had decided for them, whether they were college and professional material, or whether they belonged in manual labor.

A new vocational education: the skills needed today are, in fact, precisely not the ones acquired by this sort of consignment to a myopic, pre-employment education, but those acquired through the challenges of a broad, liberal arts curriculum: the ability to focus on detail, yet also comprehend the whole; the intellectual curiosity to ask not just "how" and "what" but "why" things can't be different from the way they are; the perspicacity to see other possibilities of interaction between discipline, industries, or departments; the creativity to draw in seemingly irrelevant analogies to better understand apparent conundrums; the flexibility and open-mindedness to try new things, whether professionally or personally, or as Ernst Boyer stated in *Scholarship revisited*, to "...interpret, draw together, and bring new insight to bear...on ideas."

A friend of ours told us about a talk given recently at an alumni dinner for a Jesuit high school. "The Jesuits taught us Latin and literature, calculus and chemistry, philosophy and pure physics," he said, "They trained us for nothing but prepared us for anything."

That's the kind of vocational education we need now. That's the kind of education we need for living and for life. #

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