

The “X” Point

by
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Introduction

“Knowing ourselves”—to paraphrase Socrates—is among the most critical tasks we face as human beings. More precisely, it is keeping ourselves focused on that elusive goal that is indeed one of the most important of occupations we can take up. It isn’t only the concentration that is difficult-- it is making the choices that are thereby opened up. These choices can involve our reputation, our employment, and our very lives. It becomes excruciatingly painful to know ourselves when that knowledge entails our recognizing that we are, for example, betraying persons for whom we have accepted responsibility. Knowing ourselves means being willing or unwilling to act on this knowledge, especially when the loss of safety, employment, and even our own lives are at risk. We see that Socrates was not quibbling about largely empty principles, but rather that what is involved is true in spades and in terms of ourselves as moral or immoral persons: at times, there is no third option of if’s. This idea of morality had the ultimate consequence for this Greek teacher. Knowing himself meant laying down his precious life rather than betraying his sense of right and wrong. All this might well seem extraordinarily and unnecessarily heavy when our basic topic concerns something as simple as testing in the lower grades. Reserve, if you will, judgment.

High Stakes Testing

In these initial comments, we will consider this issue in terms of the High Stakes Testing—when on the outcome hang things like academic standing, reputation and advancement. And to complicate things, these apply to teachers as well as students. As a result, we wrongfully narrow what should be an enormous and fascinating canvas to focus on the type of item that will be on the “High Stakes Test”. Or we in fact spend an inordinate amount of time attempting to teach students to virtually construct the test itself. In doing either of these, we might well be neglecting our primary duty of providing information in such a manner as to enhance the overall intellectual abilities of our students. We are asking them to learn the principles of “cherry picking” bits of knowledge of the kind that lend themselves to multiple choice tests—A, B, C or D.

In order to do this, we forsake the mind-broadening experience of constructing landscapes of the world, adding a little of the teacher’s personal roles in related developments. We lose sight of the value of this “landscape” body of knowledge in the preference that our students come up with the specific answer that will be deemed correct by the constructors of the test. We do this in order to demonstrate the superiority of our methodology over that of another teacher, another school, another state, another country. When “High Stakes Scores” replace true learning, we seem to have at hand an international drama of classical Greek proportions. Integrity, reputations, employment, high positions, even presidencies can then be questioned. We do, however, find solace and justification in recognizing the extent of the strength or weakness of this possibly dangerous enterprise. We can, that is to say, “know ourselves.”

Background

When a child enters kindergarten, the methodology he encounters is often thoroughly grounded in the imagination. Teachers at that level and through grades three and possibly four generally do a marvelous job of integrating the imaginative with the academic. At what we are calling *The “X” Point*, however, the imaginative methodology is rejected and replaced by the presentation of information in a more analytical fashion. This shift is crucial because not only is the imagination useful as a methodological tool, but it also forms much of an end in itself. In other words, developing the imagination itself seems as important as developing the ability to read, write and do math. They are in their very nature, inseparable of course. Yet there remains the all-important element of emphasis and proportion.

Many of us are aware of what Einstein said about this: “Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world and all there ever will be to know and understand.” In the present anthology, we will focus on deepening and unifying our understanding of the imagination and thereby placing it in the forefront of identifying characteristics of our species. In order to do this, it is necessary to keep in mind the seriousness and even gravity of our attempt.

Developing the Imagination

The imagination is one of the greatest powers of understanding that human beings possess. And since virtually everything else that human beings possess can be developed and enlarged through Time-Spent-On-Task, I see no reason to expect that the imagination itself should be any different. To repeat, the imagination is not appropriate only BECAUSE it makes it easier for children to learn Reading, Writing and Arithmetic. Not so: rather, the study of Reading, Writing and Arithmetic are also appropriate in large part BECAUSE they provide the imagination a stage on which it can strut its stuff, develop and grow in the full and ordered consciousness of our minds.

Unfortunately, as the implacable Paul Harvey might have said, you don’t know... “the rest of the story”. In fact, this delightful reversal—which is a little reminiscent of the humor of Oscar Wilde—reveals a quite serious and most lamentable state of affairs. Not only is the growth of the imagination horribly neglected as the child passes the “X” point, but it is all too often considered a source of shame and embarrassing childishness.

Neglected and Untutored

This idea that the imagination itself can develop and grow is perhaps one of the more fascinating and, at the same time, little studied areas in education today. It would seem that in no curriculum is there an attempt to conceive of the imagination as amenable to growth and development as is, say, music. This is certainly not to overlook the fact that through sheer power and pervasiveness, the imagination has hooked up with technology in a truly wonderful, awesome, unrelenting and unending progress. This, however, is the untutored and undisciplined imagination.

If we were to study and analyze this almost unfathomable force, it might move us more positively in the direction of an ever more precise understanding while protecting

us from the self-destruction that hides itself in the sweaty palm of every step forward. It is possible and even probable that the development of the imagination is synonymous with nothing less than the EVOLUTION of the human species toward the next phase of an infinite journey. If this be true, then indeed it is of the essence of Greek tragedy: an almost divine evolution like that offered by Prometheus himself, or a satanic punishment whereby vultures peck away at our entrails. Indeed, our destiny seems to rest on our knowledge of ourselves.

Evidence? Evidence?

But, you might say, I have no evidence to back up what I say. Touche. But what evidence do you have to back up your naïve assumption that Test Prep is at the heart of a more effective methodology than the imagination. Even in the extremely limited terms of Test Prep itself, you have little or no evidence that Time-Spent-On-Prep is even effective in improving that limited ability. That is truly a serious condition. Much if not most of science is based on the demonstrable presence of evidence to support a hypothesis. Evidence is the ROCK. Yet you have little or no such evidence: you have only the hunch that Test Prep is wonderful because it seems so and because that is what your boss and your boss's boss said, and that "Doktor" Coreil had better get on the wagon or he will find himself fired—tenure or no tenure.

Shameful Malfeasance of Duty

The fourth or fifth grade—and lately even as early as the second—seem to have become indeed the locus of a shameful malfeasance of duty, not of students, but of the international educational system. It is we--the teachers, supervisors, principals, state and national education officials--who might well have to answer for a certain dereliction of duty. This dereliction results in part from a wish to please superiors in an operation that involves an enormous amount of money spent on materials to help students "prepare" for the High Stakes Test. If there is an inappropriate causal relationship between the two—between the Test Prepping and the Expenditures for Test Prepping—heaven help us! What would have been mere incompetence would possibly be joined by some charge of even greater seriousness. And next along those dark lines—if they are indeed dark lines and not some sort of coincidence—is the dreadful cover-up.

The Shameful Crossing of The "X" Point

Before *The "X" Point* is crossed, the dominant mindset was on the joy of things like storytelling, drawing, painting, acting, dancing, singing and otherwise making music. These were seen as parts of a fundamental methodology that underlies instruction in all academic subjects. As the "X" Point approaches, the great motivational value of this joy was silently but swiftly shifted to the background and at times virtually abandoned. After the crossing of *The "X" Point*, not only is there far less emphasis on the imagination, but the whole invaluable attitude of carefree inquiry is turned into a machine that uses very much time on extremely profitable preparations for High-Stakes Testing that will ultimately lead to the fateful test itself. An enormous undertaking based on virtually no evidence.

The scope of the terror for children can be truly Miltonic. The subjects who have to sit for these tests are not doctoral candidates of thirty or forty years, but students of

seven, eight or nine years. If there is no child abuse involved here, there certainly seems to be “teacher abuse” and more than a few dollops of Greek pathos. I personally am ashamed to be a part of this largely pointless procedure. Pointless because all that it can ultimately hope to indicate is that we are better than you, our teachers are better than yours, our school is more effective than yours. Our nation is superior to yours. Better than, better than, better than—that is precisely counter to what that dubious Political Correctness claims to hold as true: That one group is at its core, neither better than nor inferior to another group.

The Adults—Not the Students—Benefit

Furthermore, it seems quite possible that these trials by psychological fire and brimstone are not conducted for the benefit of the students, but for our own benefit. We make them suffer because if they fail, our jobs will be put in jeopardy. We make them suffer so that we of a particular educational establishment will be praised and rewarded if our student scores are high. If we score higher than our neighbors, too bad for them: bully for us. So what if their brains are messed up and they experience the impossible boredom of quasi-military drills, drills and more drills in the academy-like obsession of Test-Prep and Pre-Test-Prep and Pre-Pre-Test-Prep ad infinitum.

Snatching Victory from the Broken Jaws of Failure

So what if those kids undergo mental breakdowns? We will have snatched victory from the jaws of children attending schools across the city, or across the country, or across the globe. We will have proved that we are better than they are. How can we do this to little kids for whom boxing is verboten and football is regarded as primitive and bestial? At least those players are not expected to duel without pads and helmets to stave off blows that might result in lifelong damage. But what do we offer to protect the precious brains of our students? Nothing! What hypocrites we are!

The Emperor Has no Clothes

The supreme irony is that virtually all of us have long been aware of all that is put forth in the above paragraphs, all that made you pretend to gasp and say, “How Dare He?” It’s a case of the emperor having no clothes. Everyone is perfectly aware that he is wearing nothing but the awful suit in which he was born, but we all pretend that every proper hem and line of buttons is precisely buttoned and that every zipper is zipped and that every fold is exquisitely draped. Of course. How could it be otherwise?
