

A Plea for “Irrelevant Education”

By [Prof. Sam Ben-Meir](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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Due to the pressures of popular demand for relevance in education, we have lost sight of the purpose for which true education exists. I would like to make a plea for irrelevant education, one that does not begin with a presumption of what is relevant – the thing most needful, as Strauss would put it – and what is not.

Genuine education does not prepare us merely to exercise what Kant calls “the private use of reason,” where one essentially has to resolve a problem that is already given and defined and, in so being, is simply a matter of applying the appropriate expertise. If this were the sole or true aim of education, then indeed one may be justified in demanding that education remain clearly relevant – that it be geared to and entirely focused on producing the adequate expertise, so that reason can be put to proper use.

What may be overlooked here is what Kant calls “the public use of reason”: reason that does not simply solve the problems it is given, but asks further questions, such as how did this problem arise, how are we defining it, is our definition – our conceptualization of the problem – perhaps part of the problem itself. To prepare the mind to engage in the public use of reason, it is insufficient to fashion experts, i.e. technicians and specialists. Rather, the public use of reason requires that we question radically the very frame of reference in which we are operating.

An education that must constantly demonstrate its relevance, usefulness (or functionality) is an education that is fundamentally not free. Being unable to freely follow where thought leads us is, in a sense, no education at all. We are witnessing a tendency thoroughly consistent with the kind of American anti-intellectualism that has only become further emboldened and entrenched during this election year, courtesy of know-nothing Trumpism.

For genuine social critique to be possible, education cannot be enslaved to a prescribed set of assumptions about what is important – what is significant or relevant, and what is not. Instead, the capacity for pure theory must be fostered. Theoretical speculation is, in itself, an activity and a potent one, that enables us to set aside our habitual frame of reference and radically reassess the coordinates of the psychosocial status quo. We should not feel guilty for championing pure theory – theory may be the thing we need most.

Perhaps an education can only become significant when we are first prepared to bracket our assumptions about what an education should provide. The push to make higher education accountable to the practical needs of students is understandable, and up to a point not reasonably debatable. But beyond a certain point, it is arguably harmful to students and their education.

Indeed, it precisely robs them of education, which must always remain free and unfettered. The goal of all higher education is a liberal mind (and this, in contrast not to conservative,

but to enslaved). And a liberal mind is not constantly bound to put its knowledge to “work” but is free to pursue and enjoy knowledge for its own sake. An education that is consumed with questions of practical applicability, with so-called “real world” significance, is certainly not a liberal education. A stunted education will likely produce a stunted mind, where instrumental rationality comes to eclipse the whole of reason: reason as a moral, critical, aesthetic, and speculative imperative.

Of course, the movement to strictly make higher education relevant invariably puts philosophy on the defensive. For example, Stephen Hawking’s recent claim that “philosophy is dead” is a rather remarkable one. Let us consider it for a moment and take a dose of good old-fashioned British empiricism, in the light of which, Hawking’s claim is false.

In fact, there are more philosophy departments, philosophy journals, and more people writing and doing philosophy than ever before. So, empirically, Hawking’s statement is absurd, but he is a very smart fellow and he must have known that; it thus must follow that he meant something else. Perhaps what he was saying is something like: “Philosophy ought to be dead.” But notice, this is a very different claim, for it is not descriptive like “philosophy is dead,” one which we can falsify by simply looking at the world and saying, “Oh, philosophy is not dead at all.” The claim “philosophy ought to be dead” is not empirical, but essentially normative.

But here, already, Hawking has a difficulty. Is he making this claim within philosophy, or outside of it; are we to suppose it is a scientific claim? Obviously, it is not. So the claim must be a philosophical one: in fact there is no avoiding philosophy. The idea that all knowledge is scientific knowledge (scientism) is not itself a scientific claim, and it can never be. It is also a philosophical one of sorts: the claim that philosophy should die by suicide. And in a sense, is this not what we are witnessing in higher education – a kind of death by suicide?

Education is suffocating itself with the oppressive and pervading insistence on relevance and applicability. A sure sign that the winds of change are blowing in the right direction would be if students began to demand more irrelevant education, an education which does not possess utility, but which broadens the mind, instills the sense of education as a life-long pursuit, and produces the kind of independent thinking that makes possible the public use of reason. In the final analysis, it appears that for the sake of relevance itself, we must be ready to bracket the question of relevance altogether – to set it aside. Otherwise, we run the risk of being blind to the very thing that (in the end) we really needed most.

That is my plea. It is not that relevance of education is unimportant or insignificant. My point is that the very question about what is truly relevant – what is the thing most needful — is precisely what a liberal sets herself out to discover through education. And if we approach education as though we are already in possession of the answers, then genuine education has been arrested, even before it has begun.

My appeal is for the protection and nourishment of the right to irrelevant education. Oscar Wilde once said: “All art is quite useless.” We might similarly say that true education is quite useless and, for that very reason, indispensable.

Dr. Sam Ben-Meir teaches philosophy at Eastern International College. His current research focuses on environmental and business ethics.

sam@alonben-meir.com

Web: www.alonben-meir.com

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