

Public education: who dictates what is useful?

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As time goes on and opportunities for employment and careers shift and change, I think that the emphasis on “ practical skills and learning” is obsolete. The concept of “ useful” is now a fluid term that means different things for everyone, and the more that instructors focus on certain, somewhat reachable ideals, the less prepared certain students are for the life they may want in the future. The classes in elementary and middle school are simple; science, math, English, history. We build up all of this knowledge to review it over and over and over again, conceptualizing a plagiarized sense of understanding that we’ve learned only from cue cards written in crayon and stuffed into our binders.

The concept of “ When Will We Use This in the Real World?” comes around in the late elementary stage, or the early middle school stage as kids rework the Water Cycle for the seventh consecutive year, wondering how many times in a desk job they’ll have to recite it from memory. Our developmental stages are wiped clean with basic, objective knowledge, and as we grow older, we find that much of what we learned is barely true or relevant at all. Often, I hear teachers confess that they can’t remember anything about any subject other than their own, and the thought dawns on some of us that we truly don’t need most of what we’re taught. The concept of deciding what exactly one wants to do when they grow up isn’t something that most children can do in their elementary years, but it’s a question of if they’re asked what they want to do in a setting in which the people around them care and want to converse with them about it.

For example, if a child expresses interest in firefighting, you could ask them why, maybe pull up some information on how people become firefighters,

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make a plan, etc. The advocacy of higher, subjective learning is a beneficial and easy concept to understand. Eventually, as people and communities evolve, I have no doubt that some sort of system will appear in order to rid of “useless knowledge;” focusing on the individual, not relying on standardized tests as a requirement and a demonstration of knowledge. The term “practical” is a fully connotative word with so many different meanings that different people in different places of different descent and teachings could define in different ways. To try to compartmentalize all of that into a curriculum is impossible.