

# Education and the Problem of Relevance

Alan P. Williams

## Introduction

Though ideally classrooms should be “chockfull of opportunities for surprise, with the tension of exciting possibilities, with tantalizing mysteries to be wondered at as well as with fascinating clarifications and illuminations” (Lipman, 1980, p. 9), in reality they often dampen the students’ passion for learning. The liberal arts curriculum adopted by many schools is currently the subject of much criticism for failing to inspire genuine and lasting enthusiasm for learning among adolescents. For the most part, students find the subjects onerous and stale, unable to bestow any meaning to what they are required to study; despite their deep-rooted contempt for learning, many decide to remain in school because their life outside the school corridors is more inane and purposeless. Ranging from uninspiring instructional methods and outdated textbooks to tedious activities and trivial curricular goals, an incredibly vast array of factors has been identified for causing student demotivation. And in conjunction with these causes, remedies that seek to build and sustain more rewarding and meaningful educational programs have been proposed from different quarters. Despite subtle differences, the proposals either assume that learning can be made more enticing if the method (how students are taught) or content (what students learn) can be

improved. That is, any given educational reform, roughly speaking, identifies either the method or content as the panacea that will turn humdrum and colorless classrooms into a crucible for deep learning. Proposals that underline content as the key to meaningful reform obviously vary in how they want to modify what students are supposed to retain. Some stress the importance of content that evokes awe and wonder while others favor information that doesn't mesh with the preconceptions students have. Another common assumption shared by many educational prescriptions is that students will find learning more intriguing if knowledge is relevant to their life experience. Conversely, students' apathy towards studying will remain steadfast insofar as the materials teachers deliver don't dovetail with their everyday experiences. Notwithstanding its potential for rectifying some of the problems facing education, this paper will raise a number of problems that is inherent in the very idea of making learning relevant.

## **1. The Problem of Relevance**

The liberal arts tradition that we have inherited from the past is facing a crisis. The traditional core curricular subjects of history, literature, math, and science don't pique the students' enthusiasm for intellectual exploration. In fact, Shakespearean tragedies, medieval history, geometric proofs, Cezanne's paintings, and the theory of evolution deflate, for the most part, their interest in learning, making them more and more resilient towards education as their time spent at school grows. Sadly, "they begin school with considerable interest and enthusiasm, but they grow increasingly disillusioned with all subjects as they progress through school" (Applebee, 1996 p. 33). Because of their strong aversion to schooling, classrooms are typically vapid, where students spend a lot of their time starrng at the blackboard daydreaming

about the upcoming weekends instead of intellectually engaging in ideas and issues that have meaning and value to them. In addition, the work students produce at school reflects minimal effort and superficial understanding of the material at hand: the essays riddled with clichés and incoherent logic are usually written just before the upcoming deadline; a wealth of soon-to-be-forgotten information is crammed the night before tests so that they can earn a passing grade; and students rarely leave school with a burning desire to continue investigating the issues they encountered during their education. A handful of diligent students works strenuously to earn good grades so that they can get lucrative jobs, and not because they find learning intrinsically meaningful. That is, for those who are willing to invest their time and energy in schoolwork, education is simply a pragmatic means to secure a stable livelihood. As Noddings (2003) explains, “One must get a high grade–point average in high school to qualify for one of the best colleges, and most must chalk up a high grade-point average there to get a well-paid job” (p. 237). Instead of sowing the seeds of intellectual curiosity, schools are exerting a corrosive effect on the students’ mind and heart by attenuating their thirst for knowledge and understanding. Because the “test of a successful education is not the amount for knowledge that a pupil takes away from school, but his appetite to know and his capacity to learn” (Livingstone, 1960, p. 29), we have to sadly admit that many schools are not being entirely successful.

A vast array of factors that engenders academic disengagement have been identified by critics of education. Some contend that boredom pervades many classrooms because teachers resort to archaic, didactic teaching methods where students are expected to sit quietly at their desk for an extensive period of time and passively retain and faithfully regurgitate the information they are imparted. Others blame the tasks and activities teachers typically set for waning the students’ enthusiasm for learning.

Through the daily experience of reading abstruse texts, completing fill-in-the-blank worksheets, filling page after page of notes, writing book reports, parroting sentences after the teacher, and other similar inane tasks, many acquire a potent distaste for education. Still others maintain that learning is distasteful and humdrum because students lack the power and the right to shape the curriculum in ways that suit their academic predilections and fascinations. Instead of allowing students to make informed choices about their education, they are usually fed a predetermined curricular diet of uninteresting material decided by their teachers. Yet when “the opportunities for choice are diminished in education, boredom, inattention, and a lack of motivation create the need for external prods and sanctions” (Martin, 2002, p. 125).

In response to the problems affecting schools, there has been no shortage of educational prescriptions that attempt to better the students’ learning experience. From less homework and more electives to more group work and fewer tests, a bewilderingly wide range of concrete remedies has been mandated. Underlying the thousand-and- one prescriptions, however, one can discern two fundamentally different types of proposals: They either underscore the importance of drastically changing how teachers teach or what students are expected to learn. That is, despite difference in appearance, most (if not all) seek to ameliorate education by modifying either the method teachers use to deliver information or by altering the content students are supposed to learn.

Among those who seek a change in curricular content, differences exist in how they want to realize their philosophy of learning. Because students who are busy remembering huge chunks of information lack practice using high-order thinking skills (inferring, predicting, questioning, analyzing, etc.), many seek a reduction in the amount of facts that has to be memorized in



order to allocate more time to critical thinking. Since what students commit to memory is soon forgotten after assessment, some argue that facts that are more memorable should be taught more regularly. Thus, instead of imparting data for rote memorization, discovery learning is sometimes advocated on the grounds that learners are inclined to remember the same information more efficiently when they discover it on their own. Or because surprising, counterintuitive information that doesn't coalesce with students' background knowledge is more memorable than banal data, some urge the curriculum to contain more awe-inspiring information that can induce wonder and curiosity.

Another common contention shared by those who uphold content as the most important variable for transforming the quality of education is that learning will be construed as more meaningful and valuable by students if what they have to learn is relevant to their lives. Advocates of relevance argue that students struggle very hard but often cannot find any meaning and purpose in their schooling partly because they are forced to learn content (names, dates, theorems, definitions, rules, etc.) which cannot be applied and used during the course of their lives. The names of emperors, the dates of important historical events, abstract mathematical principles, and the meaning of esoteric scientific jargon don't help them solve the problems – finding a partner, looking more stylish and attractive, creating their unique identity, establishing a viable philosophy of life, etc. – they ordinarily face as adolescents. As long as the subjects they learn are remotely related to their experiences, students' apathy towards studying will be deeply entrenched and unalterable. Disengagement will turn to interest if they can discern how what they study can enrich and fulfill their lives.

It is quite understandable why many want the curricular content to be more attuned to the students' needs and interests given the fact that they are regularly required to memorize the meaning of words they will rarely

encounter when reading or learn a gamut of historical trivia that can only interest the historian. There is surely more room in the curriculum for imparting materials that have a more practical bearing on the students' lives. That said, the very notion of making content relevant is not without problems when implemented uncritically and indiscriminately. The purpose of this study is to highlight some of these anomalies so that a more nuanced approach towards relevance can be adopted.

## **2. Relevance and Ambiguity**

Unfortunately it is extremely difficult for people to reach an agreement over issues in education. Opinions and ideas clash when discussing the merit of a particular approach to teaching or debating the ultimate goals schools should serve. Thoughts on education diverge partly because they are value-laden. Notwithstanding the attempt to make educational research more scientific and objective by emulating the methods of scientific inquiry, issues in education often raise moral questions that cannot be settled empirically by conducting rigorous scientific experiments. The viability of, say, inculcating patriotism or teaching religious values at school is morally contentious; people's deep-seated beliefs not only vary tremendously but their truth cannot be settled decisively by appealing to the canons of scientific thinking. Another reason why constructive dialogue in education is rare is because those engaging in the debate don't have a clear understanding of the issues they are contesting.

For example, heated arguments over the merits of cooperative learning often take place without the participants sharing a clear and precise understanding of the theory of learning it is founded upon. Many simply equate cooperative learning with group work or some other simple

characterization, and thereby fail to do justice to an immensely rich and complex mode of learning. To mention another example, critics and proponents of critical thinking in education also engage in endless discussions despite not having an unambiguous conception of what exactly it means to analyze an argument critically or what an argument is in the first place. Again, the pros and cons of critical thinking are debated when their understanding of critical analysis doesn't go beyond fuzzy and misleading caricatures.

In a similar vein, the debate concerning the merits and demerits of relevance in education is often nebulous; the participants, unfortunately, often talk past each other and the interchange doesn't move forward in a constructive manner partly because it is shrouded in ambiguity. Several examples will be given to illustrate this point.

Relevance is a relational concept. No object is intrinsically relevant. It acquires this quality in virtue of its relationship with something outside itself. Yet many of those who are at pains to make content more relevant fail to specify what it must be pertinent to in order for the material (theories, facts, names, etc.) to count as relevant. Some commend the teaching of computer science or economics on the grounds that it is relevant though they don't articulate what it is supposed to be relevant to. Similarly, others eschew the learning of ancient history or a foreign language because of its irrelevance without specifying the criterion that determines whether something is relevant or not. In order to assess whether the teaching of social studies or ancient history is appropriate, we need to know the grounds for judging the subject's relevance. Otherwise we won't have the means of attesting such claims. Is the material supposed to be relevant if it helps advance the goals students have or if it satisfies the educational goals mandated by society? Or is content relevant if it evokes their curiosity to plumb deeply into the subject

matter? Talk about relevance in education is often unclear because this important point about criterion is usually left unanswered and unexamined. Simply asserting that a subject is relevant or practical or useful doesn't make it so; the subject's relationship to the criterion that makes it relevant must be examined before determining its utility.

In response to the aforementioned problem, some try to rectify the situation by actually specifying what the curricular content must be tailored to. They do so by stressing how the teaching of geography or social studies or any other subject has relevance if it has a practical bearing on the lives of students or their everyday experiences. As a criterion, however, for adjudicating what should or shouldn't be taught, this precept lacks specificity. The students' life experiences are rich and wide-ranging; they consist of their unique interests, aspirations, needs, desires, and past experiences. Ideally, the materials students learn are relevant because they satisfy each and every aspect of their complex lives, ranging from their interests and needs to their aspirations. Thus, accounting, say, is relevant because it not only meets the needs and interests of students, but their aspirations and desires. But it is difficult to meet all of their interests and needs. Students, for example, occasionally show little interest in what they need to learn. Though learning about the present economic infrastructure should raise their social awareness of the reality and causes behind social ills, many despise such learning as academic and dry. Thus, sometimes content can satisfy students' needs but not their interests. Or students sometimes show strong interest in something that is unimportant from an educational point of view. Though becoming more well-informed, say, about Michael Jackson's private life or learning about the ten things you shouldn't do during a blind date may fascinate many, it is devoid of educational value. Content, in other words, can meet the students' interests but not their needs. Under such circumstances, it

is hard to tell whether the particular content (learning about the economic infrastructure or their favorite idol) should be regarded as relevant. Is the content relevant if it only meets the students' needs? What if it meets their interests but not their needs? If content cannot meet every single aspect of the students' lives, these questions are bound to arise. Yet it is not uncommon for those who uphold the importance of relevance to turn a blind eye to the issues these questions pose. Yet a relevant, challenging, and coherent curriculum cannot be established unless they are addressed.

Another source of ambiguity is that it is not entirely clear whether it is the teachers or the students who determine the content's relevance. Some argue that content is relevant if it is deemed so by teachers irrespective of what students think. Thus, learning about the ecosystem or the French Revolution is relevant if teachers genuinely regard it to be in their students' best interest. Teachers, after all, both have the experience and wisdom to determine what is truly useful and meaningful for their students' future, whereas students lack the knowledge based on experience to establish what is truly beneficial. What students think about learning doesn't carry much weight, given their lack of experience. Yet others contend that content cannot be relevant if students think otherwise. Even if teachers impart what they consider to be beneficial, the content cannot be relevant if students regard it as another useless piece of information that must be crammed before tests. Given this line of reasoning, learning about something seemingly practical like good dietary habits or the fundamental principles of accounting or effective ways to communicate with people is irrelevant if thought so by students. Thus, while some argue that it is the students' response to what they are taught that determines its relevancy, others maintain that teachers are the final arbiter of what is and isn't meaningful content. This is another source of confusion that needs to be clarified before meaningful dialogue is

possible.

Furthermore, those who champion relevance don't clearly articulate what the content students learn must enable them to do. Obviously for content to be deemed relevant, it must build the students' capabilities and potentialities in some way. We would rightly be reluctant to confer educational value to inert facts or figures that cannot be implemented in any constructive manner. But there lacks a clear consensus amongst those who seek relevant curricular content as to what it should enable students to do. Some argue that content cannot be relevant unless students can use it to help solve the problems they encounter in their lives. Though basic arithmetic might satisfy this condition whenever students do grocery shopping or their understanding of grammar whenever they write essays or basic probability when analyzing the chances of winning the lottery, a lot of what they ordinarily learn at school will have to be jettisoned as valueless. It seems hard to imagine how their understanding of thermodynamics, Athenian democracy, or trigonometry can help solve the anomalies most students experience. Not many are going to leave school to be aspiring physicists or historians where such knowledge will be an important and indispensable prerequisite. In response to this difficulty, some argue that content is relevant if students can use it to elucidate some aspect of their life. According to this criterion, the reading of classical literature is pertinent if the themes and questions it raises illuminate the meaning of friendship or the nature of love. Or acquiring knowledge of human anatomy is relevant since it helps students understand the nature and function of their vital organs and how to maintain a physically fit lifestyle. But the criterion is not without problems since it cannot help unambiguously discriminate useful from useless content. Everything and anything students study can said to be relevant because any piece of information they acquire can shed some light – however small – on

their life. Something as theoretically abstract and remotely related to the lives of adolescents as quantum physics is arguably relevant because it describes and explains the nature of subatomic particles which constitute every living being, including human life. Studying a language as seemingly obsolete and impractical as Latin can still be valuable because the great works of classical literature portray the vicissitudes of human life and propose ways to confront them with equanimity. The philosophical insights extracted from the works of Cicero and Seneca can bestow a sense of purpose and direction when facing the travails of life. Thus, the clamor to make content relevant is often opaque because there is little agreement over what relevant content should enable students to do. If it should help them solve problems, then much of what they are ordinarily taught must be discarded. But if content is relevant if it illuminates their lives in some way, an unequivocal adjudication of meaningful from unnecessary content cannot be made.

Finally, it is not entirely clear which particular aim in education the teaching of relevant knowledge is supposed to help realize because proponents of relevance are usually silent about aims and goals in education. That is, there is a lot of talk about making the curricular content relevant without considering what educational aim it aims to promote. But the content to be taught at schools will ultimately depend on what educational goals are considered worthy of pursuing. If the aim is to cultivate critical thinkers who are willing to become agents for social change, they need to become cognizant of the many lies and distortions ordinary citizens are daily fed by the media and the government that help sustain the status quo. If the aim is to create competent problem solvers who espouse thinking, students need to become acquainted with materials that don't mesh with their values and beliefs because thinking is invariably provoked when we face anomalies that

contradict what we believe and know. Again, the materials students learn will be different if the primary goal of education is for students to become culturally literate and educated by studying the canons of great art, literature, and science that have withstood the test of time. As Kimball (2008) explains this position, “Some works have demonstrated their insight, beauty, or truth to so many educated people for so long that failing to read them is tantamount to consigning oneself to the ranks of the ill-educated” (p. 302–303). Or if the purpose is to produce unquestioning, obedient subjects who blindly accept the status quo, the state will work hard to conceal its shortcomings and stress its accomplishments. In short, “the content of instruction is censored so that the information given to the students conforms to the dictates of the state” (Spring, 1999 p. 13). An important criterion to help determine what to teach and not teach is the educational goal one upholds. If the aims of education are left vague, we are often at a loss regarding what students should and shouldn’t acquire.

In sum, one central problem with the debate about relevance in education is that it lacks clarity and precision. Three examples were given. First, many fail to identify what content must be relevant to for it to count as suitable for learning. Second, the question of who determines the content’s relevance is left in the dark and it is not entirely clear what relevant material is supposed to help students do. Finally, discussion about content in education often takes place without any reference to the aims of education. Unless clarity is brought to these questions, the discussion is bound to go around in circles, not making much progress from where we initially started.



### 3. Relevance and Interests

One of the primary aims of schooling is to make students more knowledgeable about themselves and their surroundings. To help meet this purpose, teachers are responsible for imparting a rich variety of content in an understandable and stimulating way. Students, on the other hand, spend a vast portion of their time both in and out of school memorizing huge quantities of information deemed important. Unfortunately most students show very little interest in the content they are taught at school. Instead of stirring their imagination, arousing their curiosity, and instilling a passion for deepening their understanding, the materials teachers transmit dampen their interest in learning and deeply attenuate their level of motivation.

Students' overall disinterest in the content they are taught stems from a number of different reasons. One important cause is that a lot of the facts they have to memorize are inert, bland, and uninspiring. They don't evoke wonder or reveal anything mysterious about the world. There is nothing awe-inspiring about the meaning of new words, the names of historical figures, or the geometrical axioms and theorems that must be taken for granted. Another reason has to do with the vast quantity of content students are expected to learn. It isn't an understatement to claim that much of the students' time at school is spent committing factual information to memory so that they can become a veritable storehouse of knowledge. Given the inordinate amount they have to learn by rote, most students find the process of memorizing not only challenging but time-consuming; storing excess quantities of information in their mental filing cabinet is not intellectually stimulating for many. Many come to dislike the content they have to memorize because the process of memorizing information itself is arduous; the painstakingly slow practice of learning historical facts by rote would even

weaken the interest of some of the most enthusiastic students of history. Another possible reason why students are unenthusiastic about what they are taught is assessment. To be sure, assessment is a deeply entrenched and ubiquitous aspect of schooling which we never question. Tests and quizzes are constantly given to check whether students can reproduce verbatim the content their teachers deliver. Those who do well receive praise and good grades, but those who don't reach the set standard are reprimanded with progress reports, detention, and F's. As Ayers (2004) writes, "The toxic habit of labeling is increasingly the lingua franca of schools; without labels, it seems, the whole edifice would simply collapse" (p. 43). For many, the content they are taught instills anxiety because it reminds them of the upcoming test or quiz which they have to take and the negative consequences that ensue if they do poorly. Tests can goad some students to work hard but they don't cultivate a deep appreciation for learning and knowledge; they loom as something forbidding and distasteful, causing fear and anxiety amongst many.

Those who advocate relevance in teaching argue that an additional reason why students find school knowledge unappealing and bland is because they cannot relate it to their lives. As Glasser (1969) writes, "When relevance is absent from the curriculum, children do not gain the motivation to learn" (p. 49). Through listening to lectures, conducting experiments, drawing graphs and pie charts, and reading their textbooks countless times, they acquire a smattering of knowledge which they are led to believe is valuable. Despite the ways in which schools extol the virtue and power of knowledge over ignorance, regaling how technological and scientific progress have been made possible by breakthroughs in human understanding, students, for the most part, ascribe very little meaning and value to what little of human lore handed down from generation to generation they manage to retain. The students view knowledge as unimportant and banal because they can draw

very little connection between what they learn within the confines of the classroom and the world outside school. The knowledge they try very hard to acquire cannot be applied in any meaningful and constructive way because there is hardly any point of contact between school knowledge and the real world. Newton's law of gravitation, Mendel's law of segregation, and the Avogadro number are all impractical, irrelevant pieces of information that cannot be transferred outside the school context to help address and handle the concrete, recurrent problems and issues they face; similar to ancient relics, knowledge acquired at school may be precious but not useful. Furthermore, proponents of relevance argue that the students' stilted view will be replaced by a view more appreciative of content if the knowledge teachers impart is more relevant to their lives. That is, students will have high regard for content if it can be more readily implemented to help promote ends they value or avoid situations they don't want to experience. Two points are being made here. (a) Students are not interested in content that is irrelevant and (b) they are interested in knowledge that is relevant. The relationship between interest and relevance, however, is not as simple and clear-cut as advocates of student-centered learning claim. Though there is no denying that some students value knowledge that is relevant some of the time, it will be argued that (1) their interest in knowledge is ordinarily aroused by means other than relevance and (2) they are often disinterested in content that is germane to their lives.

Despite the unchallenging and dull education they are regularly exposed to, students are not utterly disengaged from learning. The last vestige of intellectual curiosity from early childhood is still present, waiting to be evoked by stimulating knowledge and content. It is undeniable that much of the knowledge teachers transmit doesn't whet the students' thirst for learning. At best dates, names, formulas, and definitions are uncritically and

faithfully retained for future assessment. Alongside the inconceivably large quantity of information students are expected to learn, school knowledge doesn't elicit much interest because it isn't incongruent with the expectations students have about themselves or the world. Curiosity is often aroused when there is a discrepancy or conflict between the expectations we have and what we are newly taught. When we learn that there is an error or flaw in our understanding, we seek additional information or insight or elucidation to help correct it. The drive to probe further into the subject is triggered after learning that our picture of the world doesn't mesh smoothly with the knowledge we newly acquire. We are rarely content with the discrepancy; we seek ways to solve the cognitive conflict. "A person's curiosity is provoked when she perceives an incongruity between what she expects and what happens – when she feels there's a discrepancy between what she thinks she knows, and what she sees" (Leslie, 2014, p. 64). Counterintuitive scientific theories and discoveries, therefore, often generate curiosity because what they unveil about natural phenomena is not compatible with the assumptions we have about the natural world. Students' curiosity is usually not stimulated by school knowledge because they don't experience much dissonance between the expectations they bring to school with the knowledge teachers impart. Their complacency is rarely jolted by having their presuppositions questioned by science, history, or literature. Yet "as educators, we must help young people to discern the inadequacies of their earlier folk beliefs, and to construct better, more veridical accounts" (Gardner, 2011, p. 127).

Mysteries also have the potential to arouse curiosity. We are generally driven to intellectual exploration when we come across mysteries that defy simple, definite answers; they pose an intellectual challenge which we seek to answer precisely because it cannot be solved by the cognitive and intellectual

resources and tools that are available to us. Our curiosity won't be deeply aroused if we confront puzzles or anomalies that don't invite much deliberation. Students find themes like the cause behind the extinction of dinosaurs, the possibility of life after death, the existence of extraterrestrial intelligence, the nature of time, and the origin of life intriguing because they are shrouded in mystery, provoking much speculation and providing food for thought. For example, many adolescents relish grappling with moral and existential issues like "the meaning of life and death, God, good and evil, and the sources of happiness" (Simon, 2001, p. 17). Their enthusiasm for discussing moral dilemmas and existential conundrums doesn't originate from the conviction that they have clear-cut answers to these issues. Rather the issues enthrall them because they are mysteries, defying easy solutions and exposing their ignorance.

Another reason why school knowledge fails to foster interest is because what students learn consists largely of incorrigible, indubitable facts that don't stir the imagination at a deep level. The curriculum typically mandates the teaching of knowledge that is immune from doubt; students learn about scientific theories and historical claims that have been corroborated by the relevant evidence along with mathematical truths that can be deduced logically from self-evident axioms. Conversely, content that can be doubted or issues and themes that are not subject to straightforward solutions are rarely explored at schools. Students learn about the truths uncovered by science and history, not about the mysteries that require sustained and rigorous intellectual investigation. Knowledge that illuminates our surroundings is transmitted, not questions that baffle the human intellect and reveal our ignorance. The standard curriculum entails the verified theories and the confirmed hypotheses, not the numerous gaps and conflicts inherent in our picture of the world. Yet if curiosity is fueled by what we don't know, there

should be more room allocated for mysteries in the curriculum.

In sum, school knowledge often fails to intrigue students because it doesn't contradict the expectations they have about the world and there is nothing very deeply mysterious about a lot of what they have to learn. Unlike what proponents of relevance maintain, students' interest in content is based more on cognitive discrepancies and mysteries than relevance. "When we make clear that we are engaged in a journey of discovery, surrounded by mystery, we better represent what the educational task is really like, and open up possibilities and wonder" (Egan, 2010 p. 132).

Now to the second point. Those who seek a curriculum that is more germane commonly argue that students become interested in what they are taught if they realize how it can be used to help address, solve, or elucidate problems that matter to them. Students, by and large, value knowledge that can be put to practical use over knowledge that is inert and impractical. The problem is that "students are asked to learn a great deal for the class and for the test that likely has no role in the lives they will live – that is, a great deal that simply not likely to come up again for them in a meaningful way" (Perkins, 2014, p. 17). According to this view, learning basic arithmetic is more stimulating and rewarding than learning medieval history because knowing how to do your sums is more useful than being able to enumerate the names of kings and queens. Or learning probability is more useful than learning quadratic equations because it can be more regularly used when predicting the weather or the outcome of elections. Yet the relationship between interest and relevance is a little more complicated because students can and do find relevant materials disengaging. Many teachers valorize the knowledge they impart. They underline the ways in which what they acquire now can be usefully applied in the future. Learning calculus, teachers of math often claim, may seem an utter waste of time now but it helps nurture a

logical and analytic frame of mind which is a quality much sought after in the workplace. Yet not all students respond favorably when they learn how knowledge can be put to use as they get older. In fact, they are often turned off by reminders of the future. Adolescents don't all look forward to their forthcoming life as adults, brimming with anticipation, excitement, and confidence. Rather many await the future with trepidation since adulthood is marked by demanding work, familial responsibilities, and emotional and financial independence. The prospect of entering a world characterized by its competitiveness and individualism is not very welcoming for many. Thus, talk of knowledge in the context of the future can be uninspiring. Nor does it help much when teachers relate how school knowledge can be used to address or solve the problems students regularly face. The lives of adolescents are not typically filled with thrilling adventures and exhilarating pursuits. A large portion of their lives is very humdrum because they are forced to work relentlessly on subjects that have very little meaning to them; their lackadaisical attitude to schoolwork conveys how little excitement they get from the repetitive cycle of homework and quizzes and standardized tests. Besides boredom, adolescents experience different forms of stress; they are not only under constant pressure to excel academically but they also have to create a secure and stable sense of self which can be quite stressful and demanding. Besides stress, adolescence is riddled with anxieties; many are troubled by deep, existential queries, unable to discern meaning or purpose behind their tumultuous lives. Others are more anxious than hopeful for what the future has in store because they fear whether they can find a stable and meaningful job and a truly understanding partner. During this period in life, students revel in movies and music or immerse themselves in literature so that they can temporarily distance themselves from their hardships and frustrations. Knowledge that is relevant to the lives they lead

won't necessarily ignite their interest because students want to become oblivious to the problems they actually face, not reminded of them by learning knowledge that relates to their lives. Pointers and reminders of their life don't necessarily elicit a positive response towards learning because it isn't at all unusual for students to lose interest when they discern how schooling relates to their lives. Sadly, "along with their backpacks, students carry other burdens, at times more weighty than the books they bear" (Balli, 2009, p.23).

Not only are students sometimes turned off by relevant learning materials, but many are enthralled by issues and themes that have no relationship to their lives. It isn't uncommon for students to immerse themselves in fiction that portrays imaginary beings living in imaginary worlds. And there are countless movies popular among the young which depict the lives of people facing bizarre, unrealistic scenarios. Furthermore, many are drawn to abstract studies like mathematics and logic precisely because they are not related to the world of everyday experience. And others revel in reading about long-forgotten ancient empires and exotic cultures of little-known tribes precisely because their customs and conventions are markedly different from what they are used to. Irrelevance can be a source of interest.

Thus, it is quite misleading to think that learning will appear more interesting if it relates to the students' lives and experiences. Many want to distance themselves from learning that has a bearing on their lives, and some are fascinated with the unreal and the impossible.



#### 4. Relevance and Goals

From the moment we wake up to the time we go to bed, we engage in many activities that help meet our short-term or long-term goals. We take a walk every day to stay healthy and listen to classical music to relax. But what we sometimes do is not goal-oriented. When we watch TV, daydream about a trip we recently had, or flip through a fashion magazine, what we do doesn't serve a particular purpose. Our daily lives, therefore, consist of both purposeful activities and those that aren't.

Education, on the contrary, is extremely goal-oriented; everything from classroom routines and midterm tests down to the smallest details, what students experience during each lesson is driven and molded by objectives. Worksheets are completed to help review a particular point and group work is set so students can share their ideas and opinions with their peers. Lesson objectives in turn try to meet more long-term aims; in English, for example, students spend a whole semester reading short stories and learning about the fundamental structures of narratives so that they can write their original piece of fiction by the end of the term. In history teachers set texts which analyze the same historical event from different perspectives so that students realize that there is no such thing as a neutral description of historical phenomena. Students conduct experiments in biology to experience first-hand the obstacles scientists often have to face when they pursue research.

Schools serve multiple aims. Some reflect the schools' interest in nurturing an environment conducive to psychological growth. Thus, while some teachers share their responsibilities with their students so that they learn to be responsible others try to promote learner autonomy by getting students to pursue self-directed projects and tasks. Other educational aims

embody aesthetic concerns. Most schools teach music and art for the purpose of deepening their students' appreciation of masterpieces that are rich in aesthetic value and quality. Furthermore, many educational goals are concerned with improving the students' mind; students study about alien cultural traditions because they need to acquire a broad and tolerant frame of mind that is appreciative of values and customs they don't share. Another important cognitive aim that is espoused by many schools is the cultivation of critical thinking. To help realize this end, teachers play the devil's advocate and critically interrogate the claims students make and set texts that question some of the assumptions they dogmatically assume to be self-evidently true.

Though some of the aims of education – cultivating respect for authority or instilling the value of ambition – are contested, others are less contentious. Few would favor insularity and dogmatism to open-mindedness and critical thinking. Most would favor school mottos that enshrine cooperation and empathy to those that uphold competition and indifference. When educational proposals clash with aims many endorse, we have to question their overall viability. This is precisely the problem that surfaces when proponents of relevance urge schools to teach knowledge that is pertinent. That is, the injunction to teach relevant knowledge cannot be accepted uncritically because it is not compatible with some of the central aims most schools adhere to. Two cases of conflict will be examined to illustrate this point.

One of the uncontested aims of education is to instill within students new interests by introducing the wealth of human knowledge uncovered by the human mind. Or as Giroux (2005) argues, "Students need to learn and appropriate other codes of experiences as well as other discourses in time and place that extend their horizons" (p. 104). Not every student entering school has a broad range of intellectual interests they want to explore in

depth. The mental life of many is often quite insular; their fascinations don't extend far beyond their quotidian existence. Their concerns revolve around fashion, music, food, and TV. Anything falling outside their ambit of interests is often dismissed as trivial, highbrow, or complex. Many are quite overly dismissive of politics, regarding arguments exchanged between politicians as meaningless gobbledygook. Others view quality literature with disdain and contempt, despising its rich and deep language as impenetrable and obsolete. Many more are totally indifferent to scientific breakthroughs made possible by creative geniuses willing to criticize the prevailing orthodoxy. Given how their mind is affected by deep-seated misconceptions and prejudices, an important purpose of education is to expand their mind, break their mental barrier, and correct their myopia by implanting new interests. Through their studies, students can in principle enrich and deepen their intellect by acquiring new interests. Those enthralled by ancient history will be able to transcend their outlook shaped by the present and the minds of students who are captivated by poetry will be transformed by the wisdom and lore written in beautiful verse. Yet the purpose of expanding the students' interests through exploring new themes and subjects will become difficult if the kind of knowledge they are taught is constrained to what is relevant to their lives and experiences: the literary works they read will be restricted to those that address the issues students are familiar with; the study of history will consist mainly of episodes and incidents that have a direct bearing on their lives; and the scientific investigations of galaxies and stars far from planet earth will be eschewed because of their remote relationship to the concerns and preoccupations of students. Education won't open new vistas for students if it is bound to relevance. As Furedi (2009) remarks, "When the curriculum is fixated on the immediate practical questions posed by everyday life, it is difficult for teachers to cultivate an interest among their pupils in

fundamental intellectual questions that have little direct connection to their circumstances (p. 59).

Another vital educational goal is for students to become educated, or to become more knowledgeable about, and less ignorant of, the world they live in. To help meet this end, students are taught a wide breadth of knowledge within each subject and they are introduced to an extensive range of disciplines. The liberal arts curriculum, therefore, consists of an array of subjects, ranging from math and science to history and music. And within each discipline, a vast spectrum of themes and problems are covered to expose students to the fundamental principles, issues, and concepts that constitute and define each disciplinary matrix. As Oakeshott (2001) writes, "Liberal learning is learning to respond to the invitations of the great intellectual adventures in which human beings have come to display their various understandings of the world and of themselves" (p. 22). As it stands, the curriculum values breadth over depth; before specializing in a particular subject or its subfield, students are introduced to a wide domain of different intellectual pursuits so that they can make informed choices when deciding what area to pursue in depth. When education is guided by what is relevant to students' lives, it will become difficult to make students educated because they will only receive an extremely superficial introduction to any given subject. For example, in physics students will learn about the weather but not cosmology because their knowledge of the big bang theory cannot be utilized when working part-time or socializing with friends. The history curriculum will not cover ancient history because knowledge of the rise and fall of ancient empires cannot be readily applied to solve the sociopolitical problems contemporary society is besieged with. Nor would it make much sense to learn about the behavior of insects and primates in biology if students can be learning something more relevant like the physical effects of

different eating habits or the nature of sexual arousal. Instead of writing essays responding to works of literature, students would be better off writing CVs and business letters. Yet an important aim in education – to make students educated – won't be met if this kind of student-centered curriculum is implemented. Because their education will be biased towards relevance, important themes, concepts, and arguments will remain unexplored.

An uncritical adherence to relevance in education is deeply worrying because it isn't compatible with two important aims in education. Students won't expand their mental horizons if the content they acquire doesn't transcend beyond the parameters set by the lives they lead. Additionally, the aim of becoming educated by acquiring a wide spectrum of knowledge mandated by the curriculum will be thwarted if the content they learn is restricted to what is relevant.

## **5. Relevance and Approaches to Teaching**

There are both appropriate and inappropriate ways of approaching a subject when teaching. Though the nature of each academic discipline doesn't rigidly determine how teachers should conduct their lessons, it does often suggest how teachers should instruct those who are under their tutelage by ruling out certain approaches as unfruitful and counterproductive. Literature, for example, can be taught in a wide variety of ways: the teacher can read aloud the text and pose comprehension questions to test understanding; students can read the text quietly and share their impressions and thoughts in groups; or they can read the text aloud in pairs and later quiz each other. Although literature can be taught differently, it doesn't follow that the teacher can arbitrarily adopt any instructional strategy she wants. The nature of literature excludes certain approaches as

inappropriate such as skimming and scanning the text to count how many times the author used a particular word like 'the' or 'and'. Or consider teaching oral communication in a foreign language. Again, the teacher is at liberty to pursue a wide range of methods, ranging from pair-work, debate, individual presentations, etc. But an approach that emphasizes accuracy at the expense of fluency would be counterproductive because students need to take risks and learn from the mistakes they make when producing the target language. In a similar vein, stressing how the content they teach is relevant is not always a pedagogically sound approach to take. Several examples will be given to illustrate this point.

Despite their marginal status as an academic subject, art and music are taught at most schools where students learn about their history and the creative geniuses like Picasso and Beethoven who helped transform their art and ushered in a new era of aesthetic taste and sensibility. Besides tracing the historical trajectory of the arts, students sometimes engage in the actual production of artistic work by painting natural sceneries and playing musical instruments. An important aim underlying art education is to foster within students a deep and lasting appreciation of art and music through understanding their history, nature, and purpose. That is, they learn about how Beethoven's music expresses the philosophy of Romanticism and how it departs from the musical conventions that typify Hayden and the other classicists so that they can make more sense of his music and acquire a deeper appreciation of his works. Or students study how Monet tried to eradicate the artistic forms and structures that were dominant during his time, replacing the prevailing orthodoxy with a totally new paradigm built on a new understanding of human perception. What they learn in art history or aesthetics is not an end in itself; it is taught so that their aesthetic experience becomes richer, more meaningful, and more enjoyable. Whether this

knowledge is relevant to the students' life experience outside school is not of primary importance. That is, any pedagogy of art that prioritizes art's relevance to student experience is misplaced. What matters is whether the background knowledge they are taught helps instill a lasting appreciation of art, and not whether it possesses practicality, enabling students to solve or clarify the problems they have.

Both ancient and modern history are core curricular subjects which have an important place in the curriculum. Students follow the complex narrative from ancient Greece to the two world wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a narrative that covers a vast constellation of historical figures, dates, treatises, wars, and revolutions. The teaching of history has always been fraught with problems because students rarely retain the vast amount of information covered in class. In addition, many find history uninspiring because they see no point in studying what dead emperors, prophets, and dictators did and said in the past. To help pique their interest, some argue that the curriculum should focus more on how past events have relevance to the present. That is, once students realize how the past sheds light on contemporary state of affairs, their interest in history will be aroused. There is a number of problems with this argument. First of all, the idea that the past can illuminate the sociopolitical conditions of the present is questionable because no two separate historical episodes or events are identical. There are similarities to be sure, but there are significant differences. For example, the second world war and the recent conflict in Iraq led to the death of many innocent lives but the political climate that gave rise to each war was different. One therefore has to be very cautious when drawing lessons from the past and applying them to the present. But more importantly, the teaching of history with a primary focus on relevance is not entirely appropriate because it is not compatible with the fundamental rationale for studying the past. The

ultimate aim, however difficult, is to learn what actually happened in the past, to obtain a reliable and valid understanding of how history actually unfolded by gathering objective data and evidence. Before engaging in philosophical queries about the meaning and purpose of history or speculating about the causes of wars and the downfall of empires, students need to have a thorough grounding in historical truths that depict a reliable picture of what took place. Without a solid background in historical knowledge, the speculations and conjectures students generate are bound to be naïve, simplistic, and shallow. If the aim of historical inquiry is to unveil the reality of the past, the question whether a particular period in history can help address and elucidate contemporary sociopolitical problems is of secondary importance. The primary purpose for studying history at the rudimentary stage of learning is to familiarize students with the events and episodes that actually took place. Teaching how historical studies can be relevant to present concerns is not particularly conducive towards gaining a meticulous picture of the past. Before learning about the similarities and differences between Napoleon and contemporary dictators, students should first become knowledgeable about what Napoleon actually did. Before examining whether the life and teachings of Socrates or Christ have relevance to the contemporary world, students have to first learn about their life and their philosophy. Valuable time in class can be used more productively if students attend more fully to what actually unfolded in the past, and focus less on the past's relevance to contemporary issues and events.

Besides history, the natural sciences (biology, chemistry, physics, etc.) quite rightly have a hallowed status in the halls of learning. Ever since the Enlightenment, the natural sciences have been venerated for the steady progress they have made in uncovering the laws and principles that undergird natural phenomena, ranging from the evolution of species and the



structure of cells and atoms to the laws of motion and gravitation. Teachers of science are at pains to transmit this wealth of scientific knowledge so that their students can not only understand the natural world from a scientific viewpoint but apply the principles of scientific thinking (seeking evidence, testing hypotheses, etc.) in their everyday lives. The curriculum however has not been entirely successful in whetting students' appetite and interest in science. Many view science as an impenetrable labyrinth of abstract symbols and formulas. Many educators maintain that their students' enthusiasm for science will grow if they see how its seemingly abstruse theories and languages have relevance to their life experiences. Any pedagogy of science rooted in relevance is not instrumental in realizing fully the fundamental aim of science education, which is for students to acquire a deep and clear understanding of the central concepts that define each discipline. In physics, the goal is to help students grasp the concepts of, say, force, mass, and gravity so that they can understand the causal mechanisms underlying natural phenomena in light of them. In biology, the primary goal is to enable students to understand how natural selection and genetic mutation account for the vast plethora of animals and plants found on earth. Whether the laws and theories they learn can help address and solve students' personal problems shouldn't be a major concern in science education. The point is for them to understand the ways in which these laws function in the natural world, irrespective of their relation to their problems and projects. Students must first have a firm understanding of evolution or organic chemistry or thermodynamics before seeking ways of relating it to their lives. A science education that supplants a rigorous understanding of core scientific principles with relevance is confusing what is and isn't central in learning.

In summary, teaching can sometimes become inappropriate and misplaced when relevance is underscored. At the rudimentary stages of

learning, how what students are studying has relevance can be a question left unanswered and indeterminate. The primary objective – whether it be literature, science, or history – is for them to gain a firm understanding of the central themes, issues, concepts, and problems that each discipline embodies.

## **Conclusion**

In response to the many problems facing contemporary education, some argue that the quality of education can be improved if what students learn is made more relevant. Their willingness to learn and their level of motivation are said to bloom if they realize how what they are learning at school relates to what takes place outside the classroom. Though one cannot deny the appeal of making learning more relevant, an education rooted in relevance is not without problems. Not only is the very notion of relevance ambiguous, but the relationship it has with interests is more complicated than what is often claimed. Furthermore, an undue emphasis on relevance is not only incompatible with some of the fundamental aims of education, but it is often not an appropriate pedagogical approach to take. Though education that has no place for relevance is unthinkable, teachers' uncritical adherence to it as a blueprint for classroom instruction is equally problematic. It behooves teachers to rely on their experience and wisdom to determine when it is and isn't appropriate to stress how learning is relevant to their students' lives. "As in all things worth doing, there are no quick fixes or silver bullets that can transform our schools overnight into places where every child becomes deeply engaged in learning. Anyone who claims otherwise is offering the modern equivalent of snake oil" (Damon, 1995, p. 201). It is doubtful whether relevance can be the universal panacea for the problems in education we face today.

## Education and the Problem of Relevance (Williams)

### Bibliography

- Applebee, Arthur. (1997). *Curriculum as Conversation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Ayers, William. (2004). *Teaching Toward Freedom*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Balli, Sandra. (2009). *Making a Difference in the Classroom*. New York: R&L Education.
- Damon, William. (1995). *Greater Expectation*. New York: Free Press.
- Egan, Kieran. (2010). *Learning in Depth*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Furedi, Frank. (2009). *Wasted: why education isn't educating*. New York: Continuum.
- Gardner, Howard. (2011). *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness Reframed*. New York: Basic Books.
- Giroux, Henry. (2005). *Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life*. Colorado: Paradigm Publishers.
- Glasser, William. (1969). *Schools without Failure*. New York: Perennial Library.
- Kimball, Roger. (2008). *Tenured Radicals*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.
- Leslie, Ian. (2014). *Curious*. London: Quercus.
- Lipman, Matthew. *Philosophy in the Classroom*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Livingston, Richard. (1960). *On Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Martin, Jane Roland. (2002). *Cultural Miseducation*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Noddings, Nel. (2003). *Happiness and Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oakeshott, Michael. (1989). *The Voice of Liberal Learning*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Perkins, David. (2014). *Future Wise*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Simon, Katherine. (2001). *Moral Questions in the Classroom*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Spring, Joel. (1999). *Wheels in the Head*. New York: McGraw-Hill