

Indian Hill Living

MAY 2017

THE OBJECT OF OUR EDUCATION

By Tony Jaccaci

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Beyond the “Inner Sanctum”



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Growing up, one of my favorite board games was Life. Remember that one? You navigate education, careers, investments, and leisure time toward a comfortable retirement in “Millionaire Estates.” While there are forks in the road for your small plastic car and family

of pegs, the path is relatively linear and success is clearly defined.

At the beginning of May, many seniors throughout the Village of Indian Hill will have similarly “won” the game of education by accepting admission offers to selective colleges and universities. They have worked hard in classes, clubs, activities, and teams to build impressive resumes of achievements and experiences. Essays were written with great care, explaining how these applicants were perfectly prepared to contribute to the college of their choice. With their entrance to college, the game feels complete.

When the family car pulls up to freshman housing next fall, however, will the journey be over? Will the game truly be “won?” I was contemplating this question recently after hearing a talk by Frank Bruni, author of *Where You Go Is Not Who You Will Be*. Bruni has written a great deal about college admissions and contends that for many, the primary objective of a high school education is to gain entrance into the most elite and well-known universities. More pointedly, he said we train students to enter narrow doors into the “inner sanctums” of elite institutions. We do not focus on what

students can and should do once they enter these special places. In other words, we train our students to apply to colleges but not necessarily how to make the most of the opportunities once they get there.

But wait. Haven’t generations of college students benefited from a liberal arts approach? Students enroll in a wide variety of classes to find their passion and purpose before graduating. Perhaps, but what about today’s volatile, unpredictable, changing, and ambiguous world (VUCA)? The game of Life was created in an era when a career led to a gold watch given in recognition of decades of loyalty and service not a world where an individual may have three or four different careers.

To do well in the future, individuals need to be skilled in collaboration, communication, cultural fluency and demonstrate grit and persistence. Most of all, they need to continue learning. “Life long learner” seems cliché but is a crucial characteristic to navigating a VUCA world.

Lifelong learning requires a mindset that values the K-12 education for the journey itself and does not regard it as a means to an end. Curriculum must contextualize learning, and students need the space and freedom to succeed and learn from their mistakes. Moreover, a focus on the joy of learning is crucial as well. When learning becomes a passion and purpose, a person is motivated to continue defining and inventing themselves.

Additionally, we need to build school experiences that have practical application and land somewhere between “take your child to school day” and the centuries-old practice of apprenticeship. For younger learners, this may be project-based learning—a dynamic teaching approach that promotes learning through doing and results in a deeper

understanding of content. For older students, job shadowing and internships help college-bound students not only hit the ground running when they arrive on campus but also provides real-world work experience that adds perspective to the goal of learning. In essence, these experiences help students feel that school is not something being done “to” them.

Finally, we should encourage children to apply to colleges that meet their needs. There is no doubt the colleges and universities that top the U.S. News & World Report rankings are among the best in the country, but they may not always be the best fit for our children’s unique interests. And, in a time when affordability has become an increasingly deciding factor in college choice, finding the right-fit school involves variables beyond academic offerings, location, size, and reputation.

This spring, the “game” of education has been on mind beyond my professional interest. Soon, my oldest son will be making decisions about his colleges choices, and as a father, I am wading into the college process. We are thinking about how he might make best use of his opportunities. The game of Life he will be playing is far different from mine. I want him to be passionate about learning both for its own intrinsic value (who doesn’t love learning something new!) but also for the benefits it brings.

(Endnotes)

1 VUCA is a term coined by Grant Litchman

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Asking Questions

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As a cyclist, I enjoy exploring the neighborhood and seeing the historic and beautiful homes in Indian Hill. The variety of structures runs the spectrum from very old to the newest additions still under construction.

I imagine that building the oldest homes, the ones recognized by the Indian Hill Historical Society, would have been challenging: no owner's manual for these builders, no Home Depot for construction supplies, no Yellow Pages for specialists. These homesteaders had to locate, evaluate, harvest, treat, and prepare materials for construction. And yet, some of these homes are the most wonderful and unique in our village.

In our schools, our students have a similar challenge as they "build" their own understanding of the world. Faced with a proliferation of information unlike any time in human history, how do our children make sense of the quality of information available? As the term "fake news" has become common parlance in recent months, how do our children make

sense of it all? For me, the best way for our children to evaluate and judge information is by teaching them to ask critical questions.

Asking questions? Sounds rather obvious, but through my years of school leadership in China, I came to realize that teaching students to ask critical questions is not universal in education. My school in Shanghai was based in Western approaches to learning and teaching, and many classrooms used the Socratic approach of inquiry – an exchange of pointed and probing questions between students and teachers. When students transferred from Chinese public schools, they struggled. Some were stone silent and sat in mild terror. Others took to questioning the teacher's authority instead of the information presented. This was a new approach for them and it did not come easily.

On the surface, it makes sense there is little questioning in Chinese public schools. With 40-50 students per classroom and 40-minute classes to prepare for year-end exams, who has time? More deeply, however, the Chinese approach to knowledge is fundamentally different. Beginning as early as the age of Confucius in 5th century BC, Chinese education has focused in memorizing and repeating the knowledge and wisdom of the ancients to build a strong society. Today's college examination is a legacy of this approach. Chinese seniors are admitted to college through a set of examinations based on recall of knowledge from five subjects – Chinese, English, math, chemistry, and physics. Exam preparation involves year-long cram sessions that some have termed "stuffing the duck."

On the other hand, critical questioning in our education is based on a

different premise. We want our students to individualize their learning and craft meaning that is uniquely relevant to them. "Follow your dreams!" is a deeply personal journey, and our education is built to help our children find their passions and purpose. Education should be about lighting a flame, not filling a vessel as Plutarch once wrote.

In our education, therefore, how do we help our children become proficient critical questioners? First, we encourage questioning that tests the veracity of the content presented. This is particularly challenging in recent times as information can be and has been deliberately falsified. Teaching students to navigate and evaluate information has become especially important.

Second, we model asking questions with respect. While we may not agree with the opinions of others, it is important to develop a sense of empathy to better understand others' viewpoints, thereby strengthening our own.

Finally, teaching our students to develop a healthy balance of skepticism and acceptance is essential because it is the definition of growth. If we want our students to be life-long learners, they need to cultivate the process by which to continue growing.

And so the next time your child asks you a tough question, remember they are acting like the early homesteaders. They are seeking their own "materials" to build solid and beautiful structures, and the critical question is their chief tool.

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Tony Jaccaci

Like many other parents in Indian Hill, I send my three boys to school on a daily basis with questions in my mind. How will my 10th grader perform on his chemistry test today? Will my 6th grader make new friends in his upcoming basketball season? How will my 11th grader find a good college fit? As they head out the door in the morning, I usually do not ask “what is the object of their education?” but I probably should.

It is natural to look at our own child’s day-to-day experience when we think about education. Their school is where they spend the majority of their young lives and hopefully plays a central role in their growth. How often do we ask the purpose of this daily exercise though? Mark Twain famously said, “I never let my schooling get in the way of my education” and perhaps we can take an approach to expand our view of education to improve our schools and education system.

I was lucky to grapple with this

very question before moving to Indian Hill in 2015 from Shanghai, China. I was the founding Principal of a start-up school for Chinese students who wished to enroll in American Universities. My team and I worked daily to draft policy, instill culture, train faculty, and recruit students to a school that was a hybrid of two very different approaches to education. Since there are no blueprints for a hybrid Chinese-Western curriculum, we often acted as alchemists trying to concoct the best mix of strength from each tradition.

Take discipline, for example. Students are taught in China that a good person is one committed to the harmony of the collective and that “the nail that sticks up is hammered down.” In Cincinnati, our students learn about the rugged settlers and Native Americans who inhabited this part of the country centuries ago and their individualism is celebrated and held as a virtue. We had to build a discipline policy, therefore, that faithfully transmitted the Chinese culture but also prepared students for success in American university. Not an easy task!

In the five years I was in Shanghai, I learned an incredible amount about Chinese curriculum, but I learned far more about my own country and the architecture of how and why we teach and learn in the way we do. I believe that using education systems from other countries would help us to answer some of these questions. Data and information about school systems around the world is accessible and ready to use. Far more important, however, is simply asking the question about our own education.

How can we improve the education we offer at schools like Cincinnati Country Day School and Indian Hill Public School? Are graduates of these schools prepared for lives of purpose? What is the content of their character? Are

they creative? Resourceful? Have they understood and appreciated the culture that has been passed onto them from their parents and grandparents?

In the months to come, I will use this column to discuss the “object of our education” in our village and to ask the “why” questions about different elements of our education. I hope it may spark dialogue among residents of our village, allow us to ponder the purpose of the education we provide for our children and perhaps keep improving our schools to the level that Mr. Twain would be proud to attend.