

# THOUGHT: Involved in the Relevant

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The present stress on relevance is the current version of a traditional gripe made by college students. The comment about their courses, "I don't see what good this will do me," has been made over and over again by young men and women for decades. Off the campus, adults frequently adopt the same attitude, and even professors who teach utilitarian subjects sometimes echo the thought about the more abstract subjects. After all, we do live in a practical world.

In recent years, two factors have exaggerated this plea for relevance: noisy groups have organized to apply pressures; and the emphasis on obvious social problems has been heavy. These factors, coupled with the natural impatience of youth, have given an impetus to what is really a childish outlook. The idea that it would be a mistake to learn something that may not be put to work tomorrow, or at least by the next day, has an immature shortness of vision. The doubt is juvenile also because the thought that everything we learn has to be put to demonstrable use defies our culture entirely, whether that culture refers to a symphony, playing golf, watching a movie, or talking with a neighbor. If anything, the reverse thesis is demonstrable — it is difficult for anybody to learn anything that will not serve a purpose at some time.

The revolt against the ivory tower not only is misplaced, it is a thorn in the flesh for many persons. Teachers of the humanities — English or history for example — are cornered because the acquisition of general learning is the essence of their subjects, not a stress on writing business letters or on seeking election to a local office. Parents face the query, "What good is it?" early in the lives of their offspring. Citizens at large wonder what good can come out of the study of elementary sociology or quantitative chemistry, when the young person they are considering is sure to have a future remote from such subjects. Today, however, these citizens do not wonder about another utilitarian element, the commercial worth of degrees, a value foisted on citizens by the universities which dispense them.

This is not the place to review the vast literature which seeks to portray the value of a purified and uncommercial education. Most of the ruses used are translations from the ideals of the ivory tower to the terms of the utilitarian. A knowledge of English, for example, is useful to anybody; but ask why English is taught and the chances are that journalism will be mentioned, with the pendant remark that pay checks are increased with educational credentials. Sometimes the ruses are idealistic, in terms of the greater appreciation of the arts and of all things in living, but, even so, it is the pleasure of appreciation that gets the emphasis, rather than a stature-building understanding. Since these justifications are all verifiable facts, they are not ruses; they are efforts to justify the old and unfortunate challenge, "What good is it?"

What education is can not be defined specifically. What a course in the history of art might do for a person can not be described without an ethereal vagueness. Yet, apparently, the people of the world are significantly curious about what goes on around them. To find out some of the acts of nature and of people, their belief in the educational approach causes them to spend some \$65,000,000,000 a year on schooling in this country alone. The citizen may not be able to tell of what good learning may be to a person, but, in all the years of our history, he has set a high value upon it.

The stress on relevance is doing a great deal of damage to the cause of education. Though we live in a present world subjected to modern pressures, the plea for relevance on campuses only rephrases the ancient query, "What good is this?" Today's "media" and techniques build pressures which drive professors and students before them. The hegira bids fair to destroy education, because education is not built on relevance.

Idealists will hate me for this — but education is built on the past, not on relevance. There is far too much currency in our curricular patterns, and too little adherence to an education which, though it accepts the naturalness of inquiry about usefulness, looks ahead farther than the immediate applications.

Let us consider the current pressures for a moment. They arise in black and white, in Vietnam, in the augmented bickering of politics, in questions of population, armament, housing, poverty, and so on down a long and familiar list, in which every item is heavy. Each item on the list is known in some degree to everybody above the age of 10. To students, at the threshold of transition into active citizenship, it is obvious that these problems are heavy, that they need decisions, and that the answers can be vital. Unless a direct immediacy links studies and problems, the query, "What good is it?" arises and leads to demands to "get with it."

Serious and real as these problems are, they are not going to be solved by educational relevance. By no means will all of them have answers forthcoming from educational institutions, nor should they. Controversial and unsettled problems are for society as a whole, as it creeps hopefully toward solutions.

As students on campuses demand power of all sorts, unthinking faculties rush blindly toward revisions of curricula in the direction of relevance. This is a faulty and gullible acceptance of relevance, of too much currency. The trend is wrecking education to such an extent that even now recovery is open to doubt.

The abstractions which compose wisdom, philosophy, the classics, and pure natural laws of science, all basic to education, are giving way to weird and diverse courses with titles which rhetorically match current problems. The shift not only debases or eliminates basic courses, it also makes professors ridiculous by their own acts. With the new courses, they can have delightful and exciting discussions or field trips, and can gain rapt attention, if they chance to be good orators, by offering platitudes to their captive audiences. But just who can show that these professors have the answers and insights into problems to which the adjective, current, can be applied, troubles which our ablest authorities, assigned by society directly and separately to each of these problems, only are beginning to resolve?

The fact is that basic education is a platform on which maturity is built. It is also a jumping-off place for the training in specialized work which all of us undertake sooner or later. If education is abstract, general, and basic, rather than a problem-solving device focused on immediate relevance, that is a virtue and not a fault. This is what education is all about.

However antagonistic this observation may be to the current trend, relevance is out of place on the campus. Relevance refers to where students are going, not to where they are or why they are studying. If their futures are to be a set of insurmountable problems, as they will be, that fact alone substantiates the need for conditioning before tackling them, a sound basic education, a solid background. It is not up to professors to solve these problems, nor is it their privilege. Still less are the solutions up to students, while they are such. Professors profess to be scholars in special fields. Students are obligated to seek basic facts, to learn, and to acquire some wisdom which eventually will show itself in the community and in living.

Because the backbone of education is what is known and has been tested, relevance is a confusing interruption, impertinent and distracting. In literature, the classics have been screened by time. We may argue endlessly whether or not a certain volume is really a classic, but it is certain that the latest book from the publisher is not entitled to that classification because a teacher devoted to relevance chooses it. The chances are several thousands-to-one that it never will become a classic.

History is a story of what has happened. The common remark

that only time will tell whether or not such-and-such a figure or event will be a landmark in history demonstrates this fact – the history of the future is unknown. The history of the present can be guaranteed to be confused and biased, and confusion and bias have no place in education. Indeed, historians devote time to eliminating these difficulties in past history with imperfect success.

Science can be pure; that is, the laws of centrifugal force can be understood as to what they are and how they got that way, or they can be applied. The latter is relevance, pertinent to training for various tasks, but not pertinent to the basic education which precedes it.

Philosophy was once a profound inquiry into man's reasoning, studied relative to such classics as have come to be regarded as examples of man at his most profound. Now, seeking relevance, it gives way to the relatively recent stress on linguistics, or takes advantage of the great breadth of its field to proclaim on current sociologic matters.

Mark Twain once remarked: "We all do no end of feeling and we mistake it for thinking." Relevance comes from feeling; the campus is dedicated to thinking. Colleges and universities are trying to make their bulletins so attractive that their main messages are lost. Their current messages cater to urges, feelings, and whims in such colors that attention goes to the colors. The advertisement gets wide attention; but no one recalls what was advertised.

Because of the obvious need for answers to current problems,

there is a strong inner urge to seek them. Unfortunately, the feelings of need and urge do not produce answers, no matter how high the pitch. Answers will come from men and women who combine a sound background with a direct aptitude for, and interest in, the specific problems, rather than in the abstractions of the background. Professors and students deal in laws and formulae; citizens, who are often alumni, but need not be, deal in automobiles and answers. The newspaper, telephone, television, and radio make of current events portentous interruptions to the pursuit of foundational knowledge and wisdom to which students and faculties, when they accept the responsibilities which are assigned to them and which they claim, will devote themselves.

When that master of music, Duke Ellington, was giving a concert in Carnegie Hall, news came to him of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Ellington went to his room and closed the door for about 20 minutes. Then he returned, asked someone he knew for a brief prayer, and continued – *with his music*. Though at times relevance can intrude painfully, education should stick to its duties. Education, when not seduced by the relevant, properly deals with the past. That is not a sin; it is a realistic acceptance of the fact that the way that we can go next week is determined best by study of the way we went last week, a way that is now there to study.

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## AGRICULTURE FOR NON-AGRICULTURAL STUDENTS

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An elective course designed to give non-agricultural students an appreciation of the role of crops in man's welfare was given for the first time at the Ontario Agricultural College, University of Guelph in 1972.<sup>(1)</sup> The course title, "Harvesting the Sun," was taken from the book with the same name and proved to be effective in attracting student interest in the course by arousing their imagination. The course was offered through the Department of Crop Science. The 41 students who enrolled submitted a very favorable course assessment and aroused faculty interest as to the possible value of this and similar courses not only for non-agriculture students but to the non-agricultural segment of the community at large. This paper is therefore an attempt to outline the reasons for introducing such a course, to present briefly the course content and to discuss possible reasons for the success of the course.

### Expanding Role for Colleges of Agriculture

In the past, colleges of agriculture have fulfilled their obligations by providing well-trained and highly qualified graduates in agricultural science, by providing research information pertinent to their geographic area and the scientific community at large, and by extending new and applicable research findings to the agricultural community.

Agriculturists have failed, however, to seek wider audiences for their subject matter on their own. Indeed while most agriculture curriculums have included more and more humanities and social sciences, little effort has been made to design agriculture courses for the students in the general sciences, humanities or social sciences. Since all people are consumers and since many of the issues of agriculture are directly or indirectly related to man's everyday activities, it seems imperative that more people have a broader knowledge of some of the fundamental issues of agriculture. Certainly the calibre and scope of some agronomic courses suggest that wider audiences should be sought.

In view of the diverse responsibilities of agricultural colleges, perhaps they cannot be blamed for not providing broad agricultural courses to the non-agricultural segment of the student

body. Such courses have not been requested by non-agricultural students, perhaps because the amenities of life and the future food supply have come to be taken for granted, at least in North America. Interest, however, has peaked recently by the growing concern about the quality of life, environmental pollution, feeding the expanding world population and fossil fuel energy depletion. Agriculture can contribute positively to the alleviation of these problems and although the high-pitched enthusiasm of environmental issues may diminish as the fad passes, the problem will not go away. Just as the agriculturists came to realize the importance of the humanities in their curriculums, so too the arts and social scientists have come to realize the enduring essentiality of applied biology in their curriculums. The desire for an awareness of these problems, to know if agriculture can feed future generations, to appreciate the factors associated with continued soil productivity, and the extent to which agriculture with its arsenal of chemicals has contributed to the destruction of the environment, has produced a desire for a series of courses to provide appropriate answers.

Waiting for requests for such course may not be enough. Aggressive action is needed. Student agitators have demonstrated their ability to arouse the uninformed, who, through mass action, have demonstrated their growing power and ability to regulate agricultural practices by limiting the use or even eliminating some agriculturally useful chemicals. In the course, "Harvesting the Sun," students have expressed surprise that agriculture has remained so silent on such issues as the importance of pesticides to crop production, the limits to organic farming without the use of chemical fertilizers, and the farmer's share of the weekly grocery bill. Not only is it imperative that agriculture reach students, but the average man on the street must also be informed. If agriculture is to continue to receive public funds and moral support, more people must be informed clearly and honestly of the contribution of agriculture. What better place to start, than with the contribution of the primary converters of energy – plants – have to make towards solving the food, fibre