

AWAKENING YOUNG MINDS

Perspectives on Education

compiled by
Denise D. Nessel



MALOR
BOOKS

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Introduction

by Denise D. Nessel

In 1892, in a lecture to teachers, William James told of a friend who, when visiting a geography class, was invited to test the students' knowledge. The visitor, knowing what the class had been studying, asked: "Suppose you should dig a hole in the ground, hundreds of feet deep. How would you find it at the bottom—warmer or colder than on top?" When no one could answer, the teacher explained that the question needed to be worded differently, and she asked the class herself: "In what condition is the interior of the globe?" Immediately, the students piped: "The interior of the globe is in a condition of igneous fusion."

As many teachers discover, to their amusement and dismay, students today can achieve equally superficial states of understanding. Fortunately, most teachers are not satisfied with such responses and aim to get beyond them to true comprehension—real learning. To some, this means developing solid facility with reading, writing, and calculating while mastering the facts and concepts of the subject matter. Others include the ability to sustain interest and effort with studies in the absence of rewards or punishments. Still others argue that students have not really

learned unless they have not only mastered basics and are self-motivated but also have developed inquiring minds and critical thinking abilities. Such teachers are not satisfied unless their students develop enough intellectual self-reliance to question sources of information and opinions, including their textbooks and teachers.

When the goal is to get beyond parroted statements to real learning—however that is defined—the task is not easy, and when students do not learn, or learn less than they might, the reasons are not always clear. Have the problems developed because of ineffective teaching methods? Inappropriate expectations? Apathetic parents? Disadvantaged backgrounds? Low motivation? Attention disorders? Boring materials? Too much discipline? Too little discipline? Irrelevant curricula? Large classes? Peer group pressure? Television? The answer, depending on the student, is: all, some, or none of the above. That is, the reasons students do not learn vary with the circumstances. The solution is thus not to impose on all a specific curriculum, method of instruction, or disciplinary program although it is tempting to look for such a quick fix or panacea.

A more fruitful approach is for those involved to give careful thought to what they are doing and why so that they may refine and improve their efforts. That goes for teachers, administrators, students, and others who participate in an educational enterprise. Of course, critical reflection sometimes reveals that one is contributing to a problem in the attempt to solve it or that one is moving rapidly in the wrong direction. But such discoveries, uncomfortable though they may be, can lead to improvements. Examining the situation thoughtfully can also reduce the tendency

to blame difficulties on externals and conclude that nothing can be done. In fact, even the most discouraging externals can be overcome, eliminated, or transformed. For example, Jaime Escalante showed, to almost everyone's surprise, that his disadvantaged students could excel in calculus. Reuven Feuerstein achieved seeming miracles with children whom others considered hopelessly retarded. Paulo Freire helped dreadfully impoverished peasants learn to read and write, think critically, and take charge of their lives. These are only a few of the many teachers who have inspired students and colleagues by changing supposedly fixed realities. They did so by looking clearly at their situations, recognizing faulty assumptions, and using intelligence and skill to improve the conditions for learning.

For those who wish to give careful thought to the current conditions of education with an eye to improving them, the selections in this book may be helpful. They represent a range of perspectives on the institution of school and the processes of teaching and learning. Some were written many years ago and yet are as relevant as the ones that appeared in print quite recently, showing that teachers from one generation to the next have surprisingly similar concerns. In fact, a perennial challenge for educators is the one about which Plato wrote in *The Republic*: how to avoid simply feeding students information and instead get them to use their innate capacities and think for themselves. The former results in students who can spit back "the interior of the globe is in a condition of igneous fusion" without having any idea what that means. The latter, which requires considerable sensitivity and skill on the part of the teacher, leads to real learning.

EDUCATION AND CULTURE

by **Leo Tolstoy**

From *Tolstoy on Education*, translated by Leo Wiener
and introduced by Reginald D. Archambault
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967, pages
143-151). Used by permission of the University of
Chicago Press.

Leo Tolstoy was deeply dissatisfied with the process of education as he knew it. He explored different approaches to learning in the school for peasant children that he established on his estate in 1861. Shortly after that, he wrote this essay, in which he explains why he believes that schools, as institutions, actually interfere with education.

Education and Culture

by Leo Tolstoy

In order to answer the questions put to us, we will only transpose them: (1) What is meant by non-interference of the school in education? (2) Is such a non-interference possible? (3) What must the school be, if it is not to interfere in education?

To avoid misunderstandings, I must first explain what I mean by the word "school," which I used in the same sense in my first article. By the word "school" I understand not the house in which the instruction is given, not the teachers, not the pupils, not a certain tendency of instruction, but, in the general sense, *the conscious activity of him who gives culture upon those who receive it*, that is, one part of culture, in whatever way this activity may find its expression: the teaching of the regulations to a recruit is a school; public lectures are a school; a course in a Mohammedan institution of learning is a school; the collections of a museum and free access to them for those who wish to see them are a school.

I reply to the first question. The non-interference of the school in matters of culture means the non-interference of the school in the culture [formation] of beliefs, the

convictions, and the character of him who receives that culture. This non-interference is obtained by granting the person under culture the full freedom to avail himself of the teaching which answers his need, which he wants, and to avail himself of it to the extent to which he needs and wants it, and to avoid the teaching which he does not need and which he does not want.

Public lectures, museums are the best examples of schools without interference in education. Universities are examples of schools with interference in matters of education. In these institutions the students are confined to certain limits by a definite course, a programme, a code of selected studies, by the exigencies of the examinations, and by the grant of rights, based chiefly on these examinations, or, more correctly, by the deprivation of rights in case of non-compliance with certain prescribed conditions. (A senior taking his examinations threatened with one of the most terrible punishments—with the loss of his ten or twelve years of labour in the gymnasium and in the university, and with the loss of all the advantages in view of which he bore privations for the period of twelve years.)

In these institutions everything is so arranged that the student, being threatened with punishments, is obliged in receiving his culture to adopt that educational element and to assimilate those beliefs, those convictions, and that character, which the founders of the institution want. The compulsory educational element, which consists in the exclusive choice of one circle of sciences and in the threat of punishment, is as strong and as patent to the serious observer, as in that other institution with corporal

punishment, which superficial observers oppose to the universities.

Public lectures, whose number is on the continuous increase in Europe and in America, on the contrary, not only do not confine one to a certain circle of knowledge, not only do not demand attention under threat of punishment, but expect from the students certain sacrifices, by which they prove, in contradistinction to the first, the complete freedom of choice and of the basis on which they are reared. That is what is meant by interference and non-interference of school in education.

If I am told that such non-interference, which is possible for the higher institutions and for grown-up people, is not possible for the lower schools and for minors, because we have no example for it in the shape of public lectures for children, and so forth, I will answer that if we are not going to understand the word “school” in the narrowest sense, but will accept it with the above-mentioned definition, we shall find for the lower stages of knowledge and for the lower ages many influences of liberal culture without interference in education, corresponding to the higher institutions and to the public lectures. Such is the acquisition of the art of reading from a friend or a brother; such are popular games of children, of the cultural value of which we intend writing a special article; such are public spectacles, panoramas, and so forth; such are pictures and books; such are fairy-tales and songs; such are work and, last, the experiments of the school at Yasnaya Polyana.

The answer to the first question gives a partial answer to the second: is such a non-interference possible? We cannot prove this possibility theoretically. The one thing

which confirms such a possibility is the observation which proves that people entirely uneducated, that is, who are subject only to the free cultural influences, the men of the people are fresher, more vigorous, more powerful, more independent, juster, humaner, and, above all, more useful than men no matter how educated. But it may be that even this statement need be proved to many.

I shall have to say a great deal about these proofs at a later time. Here I will adduce one fact. Why does the race of educated people not perfect itself zoologically? A race of thoroughbred animals keeps improving; the race of educated people grows worse and weaker. Take at haphazard one hundred children of several educated generations and one hundred uneducated children of the people, and compare them in anything you please: in strength, in agility, in mind, in the ability to acquire knowledge, even in morality—and in all respects you are startled by the vast superiority on the side of the children of uneducated generations, and this superiority will be the greater, the lower the age, and vice versa. It is terrible to say this, on account of the conclusions to which it leads us, but it is true. A final proof of the possibility of non-interference in the lower schools, for people, to whom personal experience and an inner feeling tell nothing in favour of such an opinion, can be obtained only by means of a conscientious study of all those free influences by means of which the masses get their culture, by an all-round discussion of the question, and by a long series of experiments and reports upon it.

What, then, must the school be if it is not to interfere in matters of education? A school is, as said above, the

conscious activity of him who gives culture upon those who receive it. How is he to act in order not to transgress the limits of culture, that is, of freedom?

I reply: the school must have one aim—the transmission of information, of knowledge, without attempting to pass over into the moral territory of convictions, beliefs, and character; its aim is to be nothing but science, and not the results of its influence upon human personality. The school must not try to foresee the consequences produced by science, but, in transmitting it, must leave full freedom for its application. The school must not regard any one science, nor a whole code of sciences, as necessary, but must transmit that information which it possesses, leaving the students the right to acquire it or not.

The structure and the programme of the school must be based not on theoretical speculations, not on the conviction held in regard to the necessity of such and such sciences, but on the mere possibilities, that is, the knowledge of the teachers.

I will explain it by an example.

I want to establish an institution of learning. I form no programme which is based on my theoretical conceptions, and on the basis of this programme look about for teachers, but I propose to all people who feel that they are called to furnish information to lecture or teach such subjects as they know best. Of course, my former experience will guide me in the selection of these lessons, that is, we shall not try to offer subjects such as nobody wants to listen to,—in a Russian village we will not teach Spanish, or astrology, or geography, just as a merchant will not open

shops of surgical instruments or of crinolines in this village.

We may foresee a demand for what we offer; but our final judge will be only experience, and we do not think we have the right to open a single shop, in which we are to sell tar with this condition, that to every ten pounds of tar every purchaser must buy a pound of ginger or of pomatum. We do not trouble ourselves about the use to which our wares will be put by the purchasers, believing that they know what they want, and that we have enough to do to discover their needs and to provide for them.

It is quite possible that there will turn up one teacher of zoology, one teacher of medieval history, one of religion, and one of the art of printing. If these teachers will know how to make their lessons interesting, these lessons will be useful, in spite of their seeming incompatibility and accidentalness. I do not believe in the possibility of a theoretically established, harmonious code of sciences, but that every science, being the subject of free instruction, harmonizes with all the others into one code of knowledge for each man.

I shall be told that in such an accidentalness of programme there may enter useless, even injurious, sciences into the course, and that many sciences could not be given because the students would not be sufficiently prepared for them.

To this I will reply that, in the first place, there are no injurious and no useless sciences for anybody, and that we have, as an assurance of that, the common sense and the needs of the students, who, the instruction being free, will not admit useless and injurious sciences, if there were such;

that, in the second place, prepared pupils are wanted only for a poor teacher, but that for a good teacher it is easier to begin algebra or analytical geometry with a pupil who does not know arithmetic than with a pupil who knows it poorly, and that it is easier to lecture on medieval history to students who have not studied ancient history. I do not believe that a professor, who in a university lectures on differential and integral calculus, or on the history of the Russian civil law, and who cannot teach arithmetic, or Russian history in a primary school,—I do not believe that he can be a good professor. I see no use and no merit in good instruction in one part of a subject, and even no possibility of giving it. Above all, I am convinced that the supply will always correspond to the demand, and that at each stage of science there will be found a sufficient number of both students and teachers.

But how, I shall be told, can a person who teaches culture help wishing to produce a certain educational influence by means of his instruction? This tendency is most natural; it is a natural exigency in the transmission of knowledge from him who offers culture to him who receives it. This tendency only imparts strength to the instructor to occupy himself with his subject,—it gives him that degree of enthusiasm which is necessary for him. It is impossible to deny this tendency, and it has never occurred to me to deny it; its existence so much more cogently proves to me the necessity of freedom in the matter of instruction.

A man who loves and teaches history cannot be prohibited from endeavouring to impart to his students that historical conception which he himself possesses, which he

regards as useful and absolutely necessary for a man's development; a teacher cannot be prohibited from imparting that method in the study of mathematics or natural science which he considers the best; on the contrary, this prevision of the educational purpose encourages the teacher. The thing is that the educational element of science shall not be imparted by compulsion. I cannot carefully enough direct the reader's attention to this circumstance.

The educational element, let us say in mathematics or in history, is only then imparted to the students when the teacher is passionately fond of his subject and when he knows it well; only then his love is communicated to the students and has an educational influence upon them. In the contrary case, that is, when it has been decided somewhere that such and such a subject has an educational value, and one is instructed to teach, and the others to listen to it, the teaching accomplishes the very opposite results, that is, it not only does not educate scientifically, but also makes the science loathsome.

It is said that science has in itself an educational element (*erziehliges Element*); that is true and not true, and in this very statement lies the fundamental error of the existing paradoxical view on education. Science is science and has nothing in itself. The educational element lies in the teaching, of the sciences, in the teacher's love for his science, and in the love with which it is imparted,—in the teacher's relation to his students. *If you wish to educate the student by science, love your science and know it, and the students will love both you and the science, and you will educate them; but if you yourself do not love it, the science*

will have no educational influence, no matter how much you may compel them to learn it. Here again there is the one measure, the one salvation, the same freedom for the students to listen or not to listen to the teacher, to imbibe or not to imbibe his educational influence, that is, for them to decide whether he knows and loves his science.

Well, what, then, will the school be with the noninterference in education?

An all-sided and most varied conscious activity directed by one man on another, for the purpose of transmitting knowledge, without compelling the student by direct force or diplomatically to avail himself of that which we want him to avail himself of. The school will, perhaps, not be a school as we understand it,—with benches, blackboards, a teacher's or professor's platform—it may be a panorama, a theatre, a library, a museum, a conversation; the code of the sciences, the programme, will probably everywhere be different. (I know only my experiment: the school at Yasnaya Polyana, with its subdivision of subjects, which I have described, in the course of half a year completely changed, partly at the request of the pupils and their parents, partly on account of the insufficient information held by the teachers, and assumed other forms.)

What are we to do then? Shall there, really, be no county schools, no gymnasia, no chairs of the history of Roman law? “What will become of humanity?” I hear.

There certainly shall be none, if the pupils do not need them, and you are not able to make them good.

“But children do not always know what they need; children are mistaken,” and so forth, I hear.

I will not enter into this discussion. This discussion would lead us to the question: Is man's nature right before the tribunal of man? and so forth. I do not know that it is, and do not take that stand; all I say is that if we can know what to teach, you must not keep me from teaching Russian children by force French, medieval genealogy, and the art of stealing. I can prove everything as you do.

"So there will be no gymnasia and no Latin? Then, what am I going to do?" I again hear.

Don't be afraid! There will be Latin and rhetoric, and they will exist another hundred years, simply because the medicine is bought, so we must drink it (as a patient said). I doubt whether the thought, which I have expressed, perhaps, indistinctly, awkwardly, inconclusively, will become the common possession in another hundred years; it is not likely that within a hundred years will die those ready-made institutions, schools, gymnasia, universities, and that within that time will grow up freely formed institutions, having for their basis the freedom of the learning generation.

but will consume only a short time each week. Many programs in all four categories are carried out as living room activities, but others can be assigned to consultants elsewhere in the school.

Students who are achieving at their expected levels in all required programs are allowed to book programs taught by consultants. The electives offered include all the traditional subjects required for college entrance.

As a matter of principle, *Future Schools* are nongraded and tracked only in the sense that all children have the right and responsibility to choose their living rooms and their electives to suit their individual needs. The current model of schooling is not suited to “schooling” children *out of* lower tracks and *into* higher ones. But it is the model of schooling that is wrong, not the concept of tracking.

The way to make students sophisticated in technology is to make the school a technologically rich environment. That most children are not fully computer literate long before the end of elementary school is a stunning indictment of the present model of schooling and of the people who run it. In a revitalized school system in which self-propelled, active learning is the norm, training for computer literacy must include competency testing on every aspect of using the current generation of computers and specific remedial and developmental training for those whose test results indicate need. Every student must have a notebook computer that is compatible with the school’s computer, and every student must make routine use of living room camcorders, faxes, copiers, phones, and so on. If we want controlled evolution from the present publicly operated schools to computerized publicly

operated schools, every nation must create and fund a comprehensive plan that will phase in these changes.

All changes brought by computers have profound implications, but three of them will shake the foundations of schooling more than anything has since Socrates laid those foundations: unleashed creativity, unlimited access to information, and mastery learning. All of these are gigantic square pegs that won't fit the little round hole of traditional schooling.

The purpose of schooling in the 21st century is to serve all the needs of children that are not met elsewhere in society. Most lower-, middle-, and upper-class parents, even if they are good people, can't provide optimum learning conditions for infants any more than they can for 8- or 12-year-olds. Schools must welcome everyone, from toddlers up to students in their late teens.

Many aspects of the new model are controversial and are likely to remain so. Consider the following prospects.

- Ultimate allegiance will no longer be to just a single nation-state but rather to the planet and to a planetary moral code that students in compulsory global studies programs must synthesize from all cultures on earth.
- It is possible to teach nearly all young people who pass through schools to read, write, speak, and listen. But profound changes in strategy and priorities will have to be made.
- Teachers of media literacy (along with teachers of English) bear primary responsibility for the well-being of democracy through awakening each generation to assaults on freedom of expression and to the consequent

obligations of every citizen to maintain and enhance that pivotal freedom.

- National governments should take a great leap toward the universal health of their citizens by supplying two nutritious meals (and vitamin supplements) daily to all children who wish to partake.

- All school sports teams should be organized, managed, coached, and officiated entirely by students, with teachers acting only as consultants. Physical education must be compulsory, and programs must guarantee at least 30 minutes per day of sustained, vigorous exercise for every child.

- For both students and teachers, absenteeism more than 2% of the time should be considered unacceptable.

- Instead of compulsory schooling, we must make universal schooling available and guarantee the right to it. Moreover, the right to schooling must carry with it what ever support is needed to make attendance feasible: fees, supplies, food, clothing, housing, emotional nurturance, and so on.

- There is no other initiative that any developed country could take to reduce the dropout rate and improve attendance that would be nearly as effective as adding residences to schools.

- Teaching should be like other performing arts: the union should negotiate a minimum rate of pay and leave to individuals the decision of whether to work for scale or negotiate payment above scale. Stars command higher pay.

- Even in the present model of schooling, teaching requires organization. In the schools of tomorrow every teacher will need organizational skills on a par with generals and chief executives.

- Responsibility for the formative evaluation of teachers (and hence the routine supervision that is implicit in formative evaluation) must be taken away from principals and given to counselors, who would be employed by every school board to help teachers plan their professional growth.

- Today's curriculum is largely Victorian, a late 19th-century expression of the Industrial Revolution as applied to the education industry. We have tinkered with it, but we have not changed it. To provide promising alternatives—curriculum ideas that will turn schools around and connect them to the present and future instead of the past—we need permanent international, national, and local curriculum think tanks staffed by visionaries.

- If strong nationhood is the goal (rather than a weaker federation of states), the highest level of government must specify the content of each nation's cultural curriculum, because, without a shared national culture and the shared national values that accompany it, successful nationhood is unlikely.

After this article has appeared in the *Kappan*, I expect to receive a number of supportive phone calls. Elation at my end. Will the callers regret that my ideas are too controversial to be discussed at the community level? Disappointment at my end. And 10 years from now, already several years into the new century, will I receive a letter asking whether I know of any place in the U.S. or Canada that has adopted the new model of schooling and childhood? I hope I'll be waiting with a happier answer.