

What True Education Should Do --Sydney J. Harris. 1994

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When most people think of the word education, they think of a pupil as a sort of animate sausage casing. Into this empty casing, the teachers are supposed to stuff education.

But genuine education, as Socrates knew more than two thousand years ago, is not inserting the stuffings of information into a person, but rather eliciting knowledge from him; it is the drawing out of what is in the mind.

“The most important part of education,” once wrote William Ernest Hocking, the distinguished Harvard philosopher, “is this instruction of man in what he has inside of him.”

And, as Edith Hamilton has reminded us, Socrates never said, “I know, learn from me.” He said, rather, “Look into your own selves and find the spark of truth that God has put into every heart and that only you can kindle to a flame.”

In the dialogue called the “Meno,” Socrates takes an ignorant slave boy, without a day of schooling, and proves to the amazed observers that the boy really “knows” geometry—because the principles and axioms of geometry are already in his mind, waiting to be called out.

So many of the discussions and controversies about the content of education are futile and inconclusive because they are concerned with what should “go into” the student rather than with what should be taken out, and how this can best be done.

The college student who once said to me, after a lecture, “I spend so much time studying that I don't have a chance to learn anything” was succinctly expressing his dissatisfaction with the sausage-casing view of education.

He was being so stuffed with miscellaneous facts, with such an indigestible mass of material, that he had no time (and was given no encouragement) to draw on his own resources, to use his own mind for analyzing and synthesizing and evaluation this material.

Education, to have any meaning beyond the purpose of creating well-informed dunces, must elicit from the pupil what is latent in every human being the rules of reason, the inner knowledge of what is proper for men to be and do, the ability to sift evidence and come to conclusions that can generally be agreed to by all open minds and warm hearts.

Pupils are more like oysters than sausages. The job of teaching is not to stuff them and then seal them up, but to help them open and reveal the riches within. There are pearls in each of us, if only we knew how to cultivate them with ardor and persistence.