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Higher Education - Just How High Is It?

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Instructional Design

Some people argue that the nature and purpose of education is to gain a broad range of knowledge. Unfortunately, higher education programs and courses are often afflicted with the myopia of knowledge, or even just brief encounters with it, above everything else. I don't think knowledge alone represents the true heights of "higher education."

The mottos of several universities, both domestic and abroad, capture the true purpose of higher education and identify a key to reaching those heights. Consider mottos such as: "That I may Serve" (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, USA); "To serve mankind" (City University of London, UK); "We learn in order to serve" (Queen's College, USA); "To learn, to search, to serve" (State University of New York, USA); "With knowledge we serve" (Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia); and simply, "To serve" (East Carolina University, USA) (source: Wikipedia.org 2019).

Certainly, there is value in knowledge. However, the pursuit of knowledge alone should not be the only or primary purpose of higher education. What good is knowledge in and of itself? The real value comes, as the mottos above suggest, in developing skills and in making a positive difference for others. While this is obvious, too many college and university courses and programs focus heavily on knowledge as measured by multiple-choice tests and papers, rather than on skill development.

In a speech to university students, Gordon B. Hinckley (1996) said, "You are good. But it is not enough just to be good. You must be good for something. You must contribute good to the world. The world must be a better place for your presence. And the good that is in you must be spread to others." Universities have a responsibility to help students become "good for something." This does not happen as well as it could when the primary focus is on knowledge alone.

I am not saying that a university is solely responsible for students' ability to achieve, develop skills, and do good beyond the classroom. Students have a duty to work hard and do all they can to learn. Nevertheless, a university, by its nature, assumes responsibility and some accountability for student progress. A university facilitates or hinders student learning to one degree or another.

Let's consider learning in personal settings for a moment. When you want to learn something, how do you do it? Of course,

it will depend on what you need to learn and how often you will need to be able to do that thing. I often hear people say, "I watched YouTube videos," or, "I 'Googled' it." What is the value in learning that way? This approach guides people to try new tasks in a just-in-time learning fashion. In many instances, this is not only sufficient but is the best way to accomplish something. However, the likelihood of retaining much of the knowledge or skill for very long is low.

What if there is something you want to learn to do well now and for the foreseeable future? How do you learn it? While videos and articles online are a good start, more must be done for proficiency. You will probably spend a lot of time thinking about the skill. You will need to practice it a lot as well. My daughter does this. She is very interested in volleyball. She sometimes carries a volleyball around and does drills on her own when she could be doing something else. She tried out for the school team. When the season was over, she asked my wife and me if she could keep playing by joining a volleyball club, and she did. She attends open gym for hours. As with all learners, she has made many mistakes, but she has been at it for some time, and her skills are now impressive. Furthermore, she volunteers to teach young children volleyball skills at sports camps. The techniques she has used to hone her skills have helped her "do good" by passing her love of volleyball to others.

So how do we facilitate a truly higher education? The design of instruction and learning experiences plays a significant role in this. We must design more engaging ways for learners to attempt new skills and use them as often as possible, especially to help others. When real-life situations are not possible, simulations can be used. Students have to practice and make mistakes. They must receive feedback. If they stick with it long enough and make adjustments based on feedback they receive, they will likely make noteworthy discoveries about ways to use their skills that they never could have made by just reading and writing about them or taking a test.

Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'" (Chan, 2019). Higher education should be an arena for developing skills that will equip more students with greater abilities to help other people excel in organizations, innovate, invest, market, protect, read, solve problems, thrive in marriages and families, write, and much more. Granted, much practice happens outside of school and after a university degree. However, more emphasis on skill development through trying, practicing, making mistakes, and trying again, could and should be a greater focus of higher education curricula.

Universities and colleges are still very valuable and can be even more so by helping students reach higher skill development. This comes by designing not just for remembering and understanding but for doing, becoming, and gaining greater ability to serve others. This is, or should be, the unmistakable hallmark and legacy of higher education.

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