
What does it mean to be educated?

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The Champion Lecture

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I very much appreciate the opportunity to deliver the Champion Lecture tonight¹. Sharing my ideas with others is an obligation I greatly enjoy, especially when the request comes from your Principal, a fellow sandgroper and son of Dr Peter Tannock with whom I've been privileged to know and work with over many years and on many issues but most notably education, Aussie Rules football and the Australian Republic. I remember Peter once telling me that he'd learnt a lot about politics from researching the life of Sister Ursula Frayne, who, in 1849, founded the first secondary school in Western Australia. According to the Australian Dictionary of Biography Ursula had "intelligence, practical wisdom, tenacity and great powers of endurance". Lots of Peter Tannock there!

I note that your last Champion Lecture was delivered by the Rector Rev. Fr. Ross Jones and was on the topic "Jesuit Education – the Humanistic Tradition". It's education too that I'm to talk about tonight – "What does it mean to be educated?" – and I, a lapsed Methodist non-denominational agnostic, trust that I will meet the high standards the Jesuit tradition has always set in this endeavour.

My first contact with Jesuits was at the University of Western Australia in the early 1970's. The Vietnam War was uppermost in our minds and I remember well coming together with others at the University Chaplaincy to work through the ethical and political issues involved. Fr John Harte SJ was a friend to us all and, like me and many others then and since, I treasure the support he offered – and the world of ideas he introduced us to.

In tonight's lecture I'm going to argue that education has become a most important battleground not in the normal ways in which we might think, namely government funding of schools and universities, or curriculum design and implementation, but rather in the way we think about questions like: What counts as evidence when we are considering different options? Are good qualifications enough? If we claim to be educated what does that mean for our role as a citizen? What's happening to the way education is being viewed today, and should we be concerned about it? But first things first, let me start with my own account of "being educated".

QUALIFICATIONS, CAPACITIES AND A HUNGER FOR KNOWLEDGE

The first port of call for my discussion tonight is the idea that education is one of the criteria that helps us define class differences and division. Here I'm thinking about the role formal education – and the qualifications that follow – plays in locating individuals into our class structure. Those well educated have capacities and knowledge that our society needs. They are the carriers of the best in method and knowledge our Colleges and Universities are set up to protect and promote. This intellectual and economic power gives them an entry pass to the middle-class. They are the

professionals with expertise and the honour and status which that bestows on them. They are what the commentators have appropriately called the knowledge class. The question follows: Is it this formal education at a high level that gives us the definition of an educated person? Before thinking that I had arrived at a reasonable, if not even then a complete definition, I would want to see four factors included.

Firstly, there is what we might call “practical wisdom”, the capacity to link theory and practice. This requires experience and the judgement that can follow, political nous and the influence it brings, and knowledge of the factors that are leading to change as well as those that provide the glue.

Secondly, there is what we now call “emotional intelligence”, the capacity to handle yourself in a complex setting and to understand the needs of others and, indeed, your own strengths and weaknesses. Linked to it is what the management guru Peter Druckerⁱⁱ has called “feedback analysis” where decision-makers write down what one expects will happen when a decision is made. Nine to twelve months later it’s possible to compare actual results with expectations and see what that means about one’s own capacities. You will I’m sure be interested in Drucker’s account of the history of this method:

“This is by no means a new method. It was invented some-time in the 14th century, by an otherwise locally obscure German theologian. Some 150 years later Jean Calvin in Geneva (1509-1564), father of Calvinism, and Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), the founder of the Jesuit Order, quite independent of each other, picked up the idea and incorporated it into their rules for every member of their groups, that is, for the Calvinist pastor and the Jesuit priest. This explains why these two new institutions (both founded in the same year, in 1536) had come within thirty years to dominate Europe: Calvinism the Protestant north; the Jesuit Order the Catholic south. By that time each group contained so many thousands of members that most of them had to be ordinary rather than exceptional. Many of them worked alone, if not in complete isolation. Many of them had to work underground and in constant fear of persecution. Yet very few defected. The routine feedback from results to expectations reaffirmed them in their commitment. It enabled them to focus on performance and results, and with it, on achievement and satisfaction.”

(I wonder – does this lead to the conclusion that to be educated you have to be a Jesuit?) Drucker went on to say that there were important “action conclusions” that came with feedback analysis – a concentrating on your strengths and work to improve them, identifying the cases where intellectual arrogance causes “disabling ignorance” and remedying bad habits and bad manners so revealed.

Thirdly there is adaptability. As the Indian linguist K. P. Mohanan put it: “To be considered educated, a person should have undergone a process of learning that results in enhanced mental capacity to function effectively in familiar situations in personal and intellectual life, as well as to adapt to novel situations”ⁱⁱⁱ. It might be public servant working with a new government or a community finding itself with newcomers from other parts of the world. It certainly implies the capacity to listen and to stand in the shoes of others with different ways of thinking and acting. In some ways it’s a part of that “practical wisdom” about which I’ve just spoken but more, as many a Jesuit missionary has found over the years!

Fourthly, there is the desire to be forever learning about your work, your organisation and the world in which you are living. Sometimes we can be stuck in a rut, working with assumptions that are limiting our options and effectiveness. What’s needed is a move from the valley of day-to-day work to the Mount Athos of reflection, where you can see the bigger picture and consider alternatives. As Isaac Asimov^{iv} defined the human potential: “The capacity to remember the past in great detail, to imagine alternatives, to weigh and judge in the light of past experience, to deduce consequences from premises”. It’s a wonderful gift that underpins our human and social sciences but needs space to develop.

Building on this basis of inquiry, action and reflection, human beings have been continually expanding their understanding of things. Much useful knowledge has followed, reflected in modern technology and modern medicine. Educated people are at the heart of it all, taking a stand on what contemporary science has delivered as fact as opposed to opinion but also taking a stand on the need to continually test and re-test those findings. It’s what we might say is a healthy mix of certainty and doubt, not one without the other. As it is written on the Albert Einstein Memorial at the front of the National Academy of Sciences in Washington DC: “The right to search for truth implies also a duty; one must not conceal any part of what one has recognised to be true”.^v

Note as well that being educated too, doesn’t necessarily mean you are an expert. It may be that you know what is known – and make every effort to keep up with it all. As the British economist John Kay put it: “The ability to make connections between disparate sources of information is more critical than detailed familiarity with any particular source”.^{vi} It’s a question of caring about and taking an interest in what research is revealing.

EDUCATION FOR WHAT?

I’m still not satisfied with what I’ve found out about “being educated”. Yes to the qualifications and the knowledge and capacities we assume to be associated with them. Yes to the practical wisdom, emotional intelligence, adaptability and hunger for learning we add to the mix. But might we ask about all of this – to what ends? Personal power and prosperity? National productivity and economic sustainability? Or is there more to it than even that?

Let me take you back to my first observation – that the educated amongst us represent a class, what we might describe as the knowledge component of the middle-class. As a class it sits

alongside others who don't have the formal education and the economic power which it brings. There are, of course, other sources of economic power – inherited wealth, hard work and persistence and old favourites of mine “rat cunning” and “entrepreneurial flair”. They remain the most powerful sources for wealth generation.

This puts the knowledge class in an interesting position, in the middle with more power than many but less than some. In many ways it's how they manage this position that is important for the welfare of our community. This takes me to what I believe we can call a religious dictum – knowledge can deceive just as riches can mislead.

We are all accountable, whether rich, in the middle or poor. This applies to knowledge as much as it does to wealth. Human survival has depended on collective endeavour and collective endeavour requires trust and mutual respect. Ideas like fairness, solidarity and compassion aren't external to the human condition, they are part of it, to be fostered and ignored at our peril. There are many different ways we can talk of this accountability, one to the other. A radical pragmatist might say: “In the final analysis we are all in this together and we need to get along. Look at all the pain and suffering when we don't”. A believer might say: “God, the Creator, is our guide and judge, telling us that we must respect and promote the dignity of all.” Whichever way you look at it, there is this search for community that brings together the “I” and “we” of human life, here, there and hopefully everywhere. It's the moral dimension of our existence.

A MORAL DIMENSION

The educated amongst us are not just the professionals helping manage our communities, their governments and the businesses within, there are also the theologians, philosophers and social scientists reminding us that we cannot escape from our obligations. In the first place that means being fully tuned up to recognise bias (for example gender bias), prejudice (for example against the “minorities” and “others” in our midst) and exploitation (for example of the vulnerable and needy). In my ACEL lecture^{vii} I put it this way:

“...education ought to provide us with the critical capacity to see beyond the rules and so-called moral laws we work under and recognise the real living, breathing, thinking and needy human being behind the screen no matter what their nationality, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation or class position.”

What we are talking about here is that concept of human dignity and the commitment to human equality and universal human rights we see in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, as well as the 17th and 18th century Enlightenment”. Indeed, many of the radicals from this era regarded the Bible as a “charter of rights and liberties”.

We say of an educated person that we expect them to be disciplined and rigorous when it comes to their search for truths about nature, human beings and their priorities. **So important it is too that such a search be underpinned by an understanding that all – and not just some – are part of the story. Finding out how to make it all work despite the inevitable differences that come with the human condition is the greatest of all educational challenges – and the most difficult.**

It's necessarily inter-disciplinary, can't be done properly without reference to context and involves judgment in the face of competing view and competing claims. This takes me to yet another factor that needs consideration – politics and the way we are governed.

A POLITICAL DIMENSION

If we need educated people with a knowledge base as deep as it is broad, we need a society and government that makes it possible. They need to be supportive of good schools, colleges and universities. What is an open and creative mind without an open and welcoming society to back it up? What is such a society without a peaceful means for managing its inevitable contradictions? Surely, too, it means being committed to liberal values and democratic accountabilities, as imperfect as they can be in a world not free of absolutism and extremism.

It's not easy for many amongst us to put a positive interpretation on what is "the art of politics". But, think it through and we must. You can't have a proper democracy without politics and you can't have politics without politicians. Their world isn't devoid of values but nor is it free of complexity and contradiction. Virtues for a politician include strength as well as compromise, prudence as well as daring and adaptability as well as consistency. What's needed are both hard and soft skills depending on the circumstances in play. Risk-taking can't be excluded and revolutions that pave the way for open and accountable government can produce good outcomes. On the other hand, revolutions designed to purify the human condition inevitably fail. Machiavelli (1469-1527) understood this but Savonarola (1452-1498), the politician/priest whose fall gave Machiavelli his opportunity to play a role in the state, didn't. Think too of Robespierre and the French Revolution. In order "to prevent tyranny he became a Tyrant", as Samuel Taylor Coleridge put it in 1795.^{viii}

I can't imagine an educated person who isn't conscious of the moral and political dimension of life. **Position, status and power they may have but can they see beyond them to the bigger picture that includes all, including the natural environment that underpins life itself?** Embracing that bigger picture is a challenge for all of us, individuals at home or citizens in the public spaces politics needs.

LISTENING TO THOSE BELOW

Talk of accountability, democracy and politics brings me to the less well educated when it comes to knowledge and qualifications. Their rights and interests are part of the equation – a right to voice along with the right to vote being an important part of that. All too often, however, those of us with knowledge can't find a way to see our relationship with "the mob", as they've been labelled in the past and still today, as one of **partnership** rather than one of **rulership**. As I indicated earlier – knowledge can deceive. It brings a degree of power and to it we quite appropriately attach pride in achievement and the right to be listened to. But should it mean the right to decide on behalf of all? In a similar way the acquisition of wealth misleads the rich into believing their experience – and the knowledge connected to it – carries a right to decide on behalf of all. Should it be so?

Knowing how to make money isn't unimportant and can't be ignored if society is to progress, but it's terribly inadequate as a basis for community-wide leadership. Knowledge from qualifications

backed up by practical wisdom, emotional intelligence, adaptability and a hunger for learning does provide a better claim to leadership but not a right to decide. That's a matter for democratic deliberation in which, we would hope, the knowledge class and the people come together to work it through in a sensible way. My views on how we can better do this through random selection and properly facilitated deliberation to find the public interest is a topic for another day, save to say that it is one of your own graduates Luca Belgiorno-Nettis who promotes it so well through the New Democracy Foundation within which I sit as Chair of the Research Committee along with another of your graduates Nick Greiner. Who said there was no such thing as a conspiracy?^{ix}

The deception that comes with knowledge has come from abuse of the brilliant concept – meritocracy – utilised by British sociologist, Michael Young^x, to criticise the use of “IQ plus effort” to become the basis for stratifying society and allocating rewards. Being a socialist, Young wanted more to be done to equalise opportunities, particularly in the field of education. He feared that the idea of meritocracy would help legitimise rather than undermine unacceptable class differences. And so it has, with some amongst the knowledge class claiming a right to power, the justification being their intellect and the capacities that follow. What is implicit in their thinking is neither an aristocracy nor a democracy but rather what's appropriately labelled a technocracy.

Counter to this I would argue that there is an implicit social contract between the educated and the less well educated or uneducated in our society, just as there is between the government and the people. When it comes to applying all the knowledge science has delivered, the rigour and reflection we associate with the discovery of knowledge should be involved. **It's not just a technical exercise that takes us from theory to practice but a willingness to engage and to think through the human consequences of the options on the table.** How often have we seen it that intellectuals are bewitched by their findings, so much so that they lose their moral compass? As Pope Francis put it: “Everything that is technically possible or feasible is not always ethically acceptable”.^{xi}

Looking in on all that the rich and middle class say and do are those not so well off, and in some cases, disenfranchised and poor. They may not have the power that comes with wealth or qualification but they do have the potential for anger in the face of injustice and the power of numbers when it comes to politics. They can disrupt and destroy as much as they can boost and build. It follows that the protection and promotion of their rights becomes an important element for a stable and peaceful world. Some from the Church have gone further and concluded that their needs ought to be given **preference** if God's Will is to be done^{xii}.

A TROUBLED WORLD

Just think of the world we live in today and what those not so well off are experiencing, the good and the bad of living in an advanced industrial democracy like ours. Globalisation has been a good thing overall but not for all. Markets work well in many contexts but not all, the Global Financial Crisis being a reminder of that. The overall share of labour in national income is falling. Tackling climate change is a global obligation but has its losers too. Many of our major institutions

including our churches, some businesses and governments, and even some of our sporting teams have been found wanting. Add to all of this the implications of the way some modern governments have taken on the responsibility to share power by promoting the inclusion of others, namely women, various minorities and the developing world itself through support for migration and more open trade, aid and investment. What was exclusive to some is no longer and we have discovered that commitment to values like “merit” and “equality”, thought to be deeply embedded in our culture, is in fact only skin deep. And, there’s more to disturb us, namely the emergence of a radical and militant element within Islam hell-bent for revenge for the injustices they believe have been perpetrated against their people. Uncertainty and change plus fear and

It’s a world that needs an educated response and sophisticated statecraft to heal the wounds. There will be different versions of what needs to be done; those to the left stressing fairness and environmental sustainability those to the right productivity and economic growth but such responses find themselves in competition with others that feed off the fear and uncertainty to create hostility towards those deemed responsible for the state of affairs, including the experts and the science and ethics they preach. This tendency of thought and practice has its leaders and their followers, and is one that reflects what has appropriately been called an “epistemic crisis”. It’s been defined as follows: “A split not just in what we value or want, but in who we trust, and how we come to know things, and what we believe we know”.^{xiii} The newly emerging tendency is defined by four characteristics.

Firstly, there’s the reliance on beliefs alone, independent of the consequences of their application. It’s the view that opinions are facts whatever the so-called evidence says.

Secondly, and feeding off the first, is a distrust of scientific knowledge itself on the basis that it delivers too many “inconvenient truths” about the way we think and live.

Thirdly, there’s the prioritisation of “feelings”, “instincts” and “first impressions” over reasoned argument and deliberation. It’s always important that we contextualise our decisions, listen to what others have to say and work our way through to a considered view. Increasingly today we

Fourthly, and following on from all of this, is complacency about or hostility towards politics and the open society that requires it. They are seen as an imposition on the popular will rather than a base upon which deliberation can begin.

Put all four together and you have what the **Economist**^{xiv} has called “post-truth politics”. What makes them troubling is that they all represent that other side of human nature, instinctive rather than thoughtful and self-interested rather than public-spirited. It’s also angry and aggressive in disposition. While we’d like to think that individuals and communities, guided by their consciences as social beings and by their knowledge as seekers after truth, would rise up above it all but this is not always so, at least within the timelines that matter. Insight comes but often too late. The philosopher Hegel put it like this: “The owl of Minerva [the Roman goddess of wisdom], takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering”.^{xv} All too often it’s after the event and not before that we gain wisdom!

There are, of course, lots of vested interests not wanting the sorts of changes science is urging upon us, involved in all of this. So too are there demagogues and ideologues looking for new

ways to win over the angry and agitated segment of the population. **It's a case of my beliefs against all others, my interests against all others and my mob against all others. It doesn't seek evidence from across the disciplines or unity across the boundaries that divide us one from the other. It doesn't have to, that's the point!**

Post-truth is an ugly world without any science or evidence. It's a world of "dog-eat-dog" and "winner take-all"; a world where science doesn't matter, except of course the science of manipulation and control. It's a world where power is everything and, in its pursuit, anything goes. As the late Julius Kovesi, a philosopher from the University of WA observed. If "what each of us thinks is simply what each of us thinks... there is no point in assuming that anyone could ever be mistaken. In that case, the only means of persuasion left for us would be force or threat, propaganda or advertisement".^{xvi} Nor can it produce the communities of peace and freedom for all, about which our leading religious and secular thinkers have had so much to say. Rather it feeds off and sows the seeds for even more division.

Over the centuries human beings have learnt much about nature and society, how to co-exist with the former and how to humanise the latter. Educated people are those who embrace this progress, act on the basis of the knowledge it creates and who seek even more. It recognises difference and seeks reconciliation rather than division and truth rather than prejudice. As Pope Francis put it: "It is not easy to arrive at harmonious composition of the different scientific, productive, ethical, social, economic, and political interests promoting sustainable development. This harmonious composition requires humility, courage, and openness to the comparison between the different positions, in the certainty that the witness given by men of science to truth and the common good contributes to the maturation of social conscience"^{xvii} To replace this understanding with a value-free and opinion and interest-laden view of the world which sees power not as a means to an end but an end-in-itself, would be a tragedy for humanity. What we have is a culture war that can't be avoided.

ⁱ I've addressed similar issues in my William Walker Oration delivered in Melbourne on 30 September 2016. It's published as "What is an educated person?", **ACEL Monograph 55** (Sydney, 2017).

ⁱⁱ **Management Challenges For The 21st Century** (Harper Business, 1999), pp.164-168.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.iiserpune.ac.in/~mohanan/educated/intro.htm>

^{iv} Quoted in [mohanan/educated/intro.htm](http://www.iiserpune.ac.in/~mohanan/educated/intro.htm)

^v See Lawrence Gostin, "Language, Science, and Politics", **JAMA**, Volume 319, No 6, 13 Feb (2018)

^{vi} johnkay.com/2015/08/26/a-varied-approach-driven-education-is-now-more-useful-than-job-specific-skills

^{vii} **ACEL Monograph 55**, p.6.

^{viii} **The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Lecturer 1795** (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p.35.

^{ix} See Geoff Gallop "Helping our democracy to work better" in **Meanjin Quarterly**, Vol 74, No 3, Spring 2015.

^x **The Rise of the Meritocracy** (Pelican, 1958)

^{xi} www.thetablet.co.uk/news/science-and-religion

^{xii} See Gerald Arbuckle, **A 'preferential option for the poor'** (CHA Publications, 2008).

^{xiii} David Roberts, "America is facing an epistemic crisis", **Vox**, November2, 2017.

^{xiv} "The Art of the Lie" (10 Sep. 2016)

^{xv} **The Philosophy of Right**, Preface, 1820

^{xvi} “The Temptation of Absolute Truth”, **20th Century**, vol.16, Autumn 1962; p.218.

^{xvii} “Address to the National Committee of Biosafety and Biotechnology and Life Sciences”, April 11, 2017.