

PHAVISMINDA Journal

Volume 16 & 17 (May 2018): 97-110.

THE AGORA AND THE ACADEMY: REVISITING THE MARKETPLACE AND EDUCATION TODAY

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Society's Challenge to Education

Those of us who have been tasked with educating the future citizens of society know, only too well, that the age-old adage that education is about preparing them for the future is not as straightforward as it might appear to be. Developments in society present a constant challenge to the educative process, something that Socrates, as he walked around the agora in ancient Athens, had already observed.¹ As we address this issue today, it can be helpful, of course, to make the distinction between the immediate future and the long-term development of those whom we are educating. Prudence would advise that we focus even more closely on the job-market, earning capabilities and professional preparation, thereby facilitating the learners' entry into a much developed and increasingly more competitive society. At the same time, we also need to pay full attention to the more long-term process of ensuring their individual development by honing in on their innate talents and by providing opportunities to develop these through further training so that they can enrich or satisfy their needs and thereby contribute to society's progress.

But in addition to all of these—and there are others, of course—the task of education must also be cognizant of the kind of society in which the learners are expected to live and to play a role. It is vital therefore that educators become *au fait* with any

developments in society itself. Preparation for the future of the educands thus entails that the educative process should also address the needs that arise from these developments.

The Marketplace

One such development in contemporary society has occurred in the marketplace—today's *agora*. Accordingly, it is important that we revisit the relationship between education and the marketplace today. Since education, among its manifold aims, is expected—as has been noted already—to prepare learners for their role in society, an essential consideration for educators is how to meet the changing demands which have occurred and may occur. While the marketplace has featured at all times in any review of education as a preparation for the future, today the phenomenon of globalization and the power of social media present particular challenges. We now live in what has become known as the knowledge-society and have been made aware of the importance of competitiveness in education.² Indeed we have already been feeling the impact of this climate of change and the need to prepare learners for a demanding and ruthlessly competitive knowledge-society. There has been an urgent demand on educational institutions to be alert and responsive to this change in the workplace. As is to be expected, there are important implications for our educational programmes, learning outcomes, teaching/learning, assessment methods, and so on.

This attention to the demands of the marketplace is hardly surprising, given the nature of education. To some extent, all these changes are inevitable and even necessary, and one wonders whether academics and institutions should simply accept the situation and adapt accordingly, whether enthusiastically or grudgingly. For some, however, the crucial question here is whether the marketplace or the labour arena should serve not only as the context but also the criterion for our

educational task. There has been much criticism of the so-called “business model” being imposed on the academic community.

Before probing into that criticism, however, we may need to examine, first of all, whether the basis for the call to academic institutions to focus more sharply on the marketplace or the labour arena as they review their role and place in contemporary society is really contrary to what university education is about. After all, universities and institutes of learning—whether funded publicly or privately—originate, develop and flourish within society. Consequently, they do have a social role and responsibility.³ That society to which they belong and are accountable, whether we like it or not, includes the marketplace and the labour arena. In fact, it may even be argued that it is predominantly of that nature since finance and business are what regulate our daily lives. It would be unimaginable to survive without them. The marketplace and the labour arena are indeed the context in which we play out our roles in academia. While this was true in the past, it is even more so in our times.

But does that mean that the so-called “business model” of such a context should also regulate and evaluate our schedules, our performance and our outcomes? To this question, let me offer a typical philosophical answer: yes and no. Yes, because to some extent that context directs us to our co-players, as it were; namely, the business and commercial world. Academia needs to be able not only to live with but also to dialogue with these co-players in language to which they are attuned. We need to live with and in the agora of our day. As the saying goes, we do need not just to talk the talk but also to walk the walk!

On the other hand, the second part of my answer to the question as to whether the business model should also regulate and evaluate us was “no”. Simply put, academia is not the business world. It has a distinctive status in society and makes a specific contribution to it. Earlier I had referred to academia’s responsibility to society. The value of that word “responsibility”,

aside from its common meaning of accountability, is that it also reminds us that it is a “response”, not merely an “implementation”. Academia, in its endeavours to fulfil its role within society, may need to challenge and critique the marketplace, the labour arena and the business world. While academia needs to address common concerns, it can offer another valuable perspective framed by its traditions, widened by its studies, and grounded in its values. Again, the Academy of ancient Greece showed that to be true and valuable.

Knowledge, Competence, and Skills

The demands of the marketplace resulting in the focus on knowledge, competence and skills—the so-called “learning outcomes” that somehow have become the objectives of education today—mean that we need to look more closely at how that expectation relates to what we are doing in education, particularly in our present context. When the end products seem to have become more important than the process itself, then there is a need to take stock. When the success of educational endeavours is measured in terms of empirical evidence, the so-called “hard outputs”, that the learning outcomes have been achieved—all of which justify the academic award—one begins to wonder to what extent we are committed to simply ensuring that we reach our targets. All along one would be forgiven for wondering whether education has become too oriented towards producing the right products—as indeed some have already been alerting us to, whether in the printed media or in academic circles.⁴

Those of us who have looked at education as the process that begins in wonder but ends in wisdom—no doubt, influenced by ancient Greek philosophy’s conception of itself—can become disoriented and even aggrieved at this changed focus of education. And if you add to that view the claim that education itself, *educere*, is about “the leading out” of the learner from

darkness to the light, then one begins to have misgivings about the emphasis on the actual results rather than on the attempts or the efforts of both the educator and the educand. And one will suspect that the destination has become more important than the journey, robbing all of the excitement, the ups and downs as one moves towards the light.

Nonetheless, as I have indicated previously, there are good reasons for this shift not only because it is called for and even required by the authorities to whom, among others, our educational task is accountable but also because it is crucial that students are prepared by their academic institutions with appropriate knowledge, skills, and competence to enable them to meet the present demands of society. The task of educating our students today takes place in a society that is fast changing, complex, and diverse, features which place significant demands on educators. Every society and every generation, of course, has its own set of characteristics and problems that require different responses from educators. This has been so throughout history. But it seems to me that today's society, with the values that it upholds, has a particular challenge for those of us who are involved in educating today's students.

I have defended as the context of our academic work the marketplace (or if you prefer, the *agora*, just as it was in ancient Greece). The reasonable demand that we take account of the labour market or that we consult our stakeholders whenever we propose or review our academic programmes rightly forces us to remain relevant and competitive. It is very much worth our while to keep the end-result in sight. The same can be said of the view that life-long learning, which is what education is really about, should be marked by recognizable stages. Each stage has a definite goal. A goal is worth pursuing when it has tangible features. In insisting that we clearly identify the learning outcomes for each of these stages, we are recognizing and acknowledging the achievements at each stage of the learning

process. Knowledge, competence and skills are important to enable our students to take their rightful place in society. It is life-long process. In other words, education is for life. And it is our responsibility as educators to facilitate that process.

On the other hand, education is much more than that. And with all the calls for a “knowledge-based society” we are in danger of forgetting that point. I believe—and this is a conviction that comes from several years of being closely involved in education in Ireland, Britain, the USA, and for shorter periods in various other countries—that this wider vision of education is just as true for students in the sciences, business, engineering, and other professional schools as it is in the humanities. This is because I firmly believe that education, in whatever form or context, should ultimately be grounded in the development of the human person.⁵ It is a belief that has been nurtured, tested and developed by my philosophical pursuits and contextualized, facilitated and deepened by my involvement with various academic institutions throughout the world.⁶ Alfred North Whitehead talks of the need for “the liberal spirit” in technical education and science.⁷ This observation is rooted in the claim that human nature, rather than simply culture, is the basis of education.

Education and the Pursuit of Wisdom

Education for me—and I would hazard the hope that many would agree with this understanding—is first and foremost *the pursuit of wisdom*.⁸ It is a view that requires some qualification as well as clarification. I have already remarked on the present tendency, one that is particularly evident in our market-driven and technological society, to associate college or university education with the acquisition of knowledge and the development of skills. Let me repeat that this is not only understandable but also crucial if the education that an institution provides is to be found appropriate and relevant.

Nonetheless, something is amiss if the entire focus of the educational task becomes too narrowly directed at this consideration, important though it may be. The pursuit of wisdom as the educational task, understood as *the active participation in our full development as human persons*, highlights certain essential features that do not always stand out with the other conceptions mentioned earlier. It is also something that needs to be repeatedly emphasized today, while taking into account contemporary needs, as we reflect on “what it is that we are doing when we are educating our students”.

Because the term “wisdom” itself is understood in different ways, I should like to explain how I understand it in this context. Wisdom, as will have been noted from my earlier comments, is not just the acquisition of knowledge or the development of skills and talents although these are an integral part of the pursuit of wisdom itself. Nor is it, as is sometimes narrowly interpreted, the development of one’s individuality, particularly when one associates it with the description of “a learned individual”. These interpretations fail to take into serious account the fullness of our humanity—which is the basis of education. Wisdom ultimately is rooted in our nature as human beings and the various dimensions of our humanity: intellectual, emotional, ethical, spiritual, aesthetic, social, creative, and others. The pursuit of wisdom is the attempt to recognize, integrate and develop all those dimensions. Or as Wilhelm von Humboldt puts it, “the complete training of the human personality.”⁹ It is also an awareness that our identity as human persons is shaped and nourished by the community to which we belong. In turn our own activities, decisions, and commitments have an effect on the community.¹⁰ Plato, Confucius, and Buber, among others, drew our attention to this understanding of wisdom when they wrote about the importance of the development of one’s moral character in connection with the search for wisdom.¹¹ Education towards wisdom is thus a holistic

process because the goal and its foundation are themselves holistic.

If indeed the educational task entails the pursuit of wisdom as described above, I regard the role of an educator as one who enhances, that is to say, *evokes, provokes, invokes, and convokes*, that process among the learners.¹² In and outside the classroom, in informal and formal contacts with the learners, in creative and scholarly activity, one should strive to keep that task in mind. For this reason, teaching is neither a “pouring of information” nor merely “an intellectual exercise”. Nor should it be seen as primarily preparing learners for the exams that will lead to an award.¹³ Rather, it is a journey or an exploration whereby the learners and the educator address the questions that they are asking, evaluate their significance and draw on various resources for possible answers.¹⁴ Moreover, the process (of searching for answers) is just as important as any answers that they may arrive at because the very act itself of pursuing wisdom already enhances our development as human beings. The process is also important because hopefully it transforms us into better human beings because we have taken the time (inside and outside the classroom) to delve deeper into those questions and to face up to their implications. If wisdom is indeed the development of the whole person, then the spiritual dimension, too, cannot be ignored. There is a transcendent side to the human person, and if we are to do the human person justice, then it becomes an important factor in the pursuit of wisdom. The various service activities and the active cultivation of an *ethos*, an integral part of the programme of education, further the pursuit of wisdom. Moreover, they contextualize that pursuit as we broaden our vision of what it means to be a human person in the diverse and multicultural community that we find ourselves in and serve today.

This understanding of one’s role as an educator should thus inform and substantiate the objectives, content and the

methodology of one's teaching. Because an educator has journeyed towards wisdom, and continues to do so, he/she can be an effective guide in the learners' pursuit of wisdom. Whitehead talks of the importance of taking into account what he calls "the rhythm of education"¹⁵ as well "the rhythmic claims of freedom and discipline."¹⁶ Moreover, that role can be complemented and supported by scholarly, creative and professional endeavours. The questions we ask and the answers we gather from various sources need to be pursued even further. They need to be investigated with rigour at a deeper level.¹⁷ What prompts scholarly and creative work is similar to that which motivates teaching: the pursuit of wisdom. An educator wants to share with others the excitement, as well as any discoveries, as he/she undertakes his/her own journey. As Whitehead puts it, "it is the function of the scholar to evoke into life wisdom and beauty which, apart from his magic, would remain lost in the past."¹⁸

Learning Outcomes or Learner Outcome?

This leads me to make the claim that in highlighting the importance of identifying and achieving learning outcomes at various stages, we should not forget the fundamental reason for this task, namely, the development of the person. So perhaps we should be describing the "learner outcome", awkward though that phrase may be. The question which I believe should be addressed by academic institutions is: "What kind of a learner do they want to leave their trusteeship?"—inasmuch as these institutions have been entrusted with their education? Rather than seek to attract certain individuals (to gain greater prestige) academic institutions, if they are really intent on showing their worth, should concentrate on the kind of graduates whose education they have had the responsibility of providing. Lest this be misunderstood, my point is not so much the compiling of graduate data showing the jobs, careers, achievements or

further opportunities of their graduates, but rather supporting the kind of persons who have “emerged from their portals” as it were. An ancient inscription over a library captures my point succinctly: *Intra sapiens, exi sapientior*.

In this instance, let me return to an earlier point which I had made—that academic institutions have also an important role in challenging and critiquing society. We have already noted the changing expectations of academic institutions as a result of a changed society. But we need to be forcefully reminded that education is not just about outcomes, performance, and standards. Ultimately and fundamentally, it is about the learning process, one that involves the learner and the educator. It is about the human person, individually and collectively, and the human condition. Here is where academic institutions are in a particularly strong position to bring these considerations to the notice of society and to work for its well-being—and to critique it when this important consideration is overlooked or neglected. I should like to think that it is what was behind Newman’s model: that education is about the person, not just the worker, the labourer, the technocrat, business individual, and so on. Focusing on the humanity of the learner reveals a multi-faceted task since the human person is a multi-faceted reality.

As we celebrate our creativeness and genius in the changing emphasis in education, we can lose sight of humanistic values. We can exploit others to our advantage so as to further our interests, unmindful of their dignity as human beings. This is what Moltmann means when he wrote that “we have created a bureaucracy which condemns the individual to impotency”¹⁹ and echoed by Eric Fromm when he asks whether we have to produce sick people in order to have a healthy economy.²⁰ For though “science has made possible many marvellous things... [it] has helped to produce a technological society wherein man is reduced to the level of machines.”²¹ Unless we succeed in putting human goals in this technological society of ours, so that we do

not remain fascinated exclusively by the accumulation of economic potencies which urge us to “produce more—consume more” then, as Moltmann rightly observes, the very progress we witness today will devour our very humanity and leave us slaves adjusted to prosperity.²² We would do well to listen to T.S. Eliot’s observations penned in the following lines of his *The Rock*:

The endless cycle of idea and action,
Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.
All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,
All our ignorance brings us nearer to our death,
But nearness to death no nearer to God.
Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?²³

Concluding Comment

In what way can we deal with this challenge? What distinctive contribution to society today can those of us in academia make? How can the study of humanities—traditionally the preserve of universities—convincingly show that the knowledge, competence and skills acquired by the learners are relevant? To what extent can all these be made credible to the marketplace, the labour arena and the business world?

No doubt, these questions will continue to challenge the task of education. In this paper, I have acknowledged the importance of the marketplace, resulting from changes in society, as the context of education today. However, I have also argued that the process of education, while heeding the call and the proposals from various quarters which accept that context, should not neglect a very fundamental consideration; namely, that education is about the development of the human person. It is for this reason that in revisiting the agora and the

marketplace today I have reminded ourselves that wisdom, and not just knowledge, skills and competence should dominate our considerations and strategies.²⁴ To put it in another way, academia indeed needs to adapt. But it should continue to transform society and not just serve it. Academia should not be enslaved by the agora. We need to acknowledge the climate of change, but we would also want in some respects to change the climate. We have transitioned from the information-society to the knowledge-society.²⁵ Let us hope that we will soon move to the wisdom-society because of the work that we do in academia, especially in the humanities. Society will then, perhaps only then, be a community—*with* and *because of* learning.

ENDNOTES

¹ There has always been a tension between the marketplace and the academy even in ancient Greece as can be noted in the disputes between the Sophists and Plato's Academy. Cf. Robert R. Rusk, *Doctrines of the Great Educators*, 4th edition (London: Macmillan, N.Y. : St. Martin's Press, 1969), 1-38.

²In this respect, as a consequence of these developments, there has been a shift in emphasis in university education in Europe effected by what is referred to as the Bologna Process. Intended to create the European Higher Education Area in 2010, it was launched on 19th June 1999, with the signing of the Bologna Declaration by 29 Education Ministers of Education. Preceded by the Sorbonne Declaration of 1998, it aimed, among others, to make academic degree standards and quality assurance procedures more comparable and compatible throughout Europe. The Bologna Process continues to increase in membership. Its official website is: <http://www.ehea.info/>.

³ The "Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education: Realising the European Higher Education Area" (Berlin 2003) reaffirms the notion that "higher education is a public good and a public responsibility." The Bergen 2005 Communiqué stresses the "social dimension" of education: "The social dimension includes measures taken by governments to help students, especially from socially disadvantaged groups, in financial and economic aspects and to provide them with guidance and counselling services with a view to widening access."

⁴ This would be contrary to the advice given by Mr. Gradgrind in Dickens's novel, *Hard Times*, 41, the one should never wonder.

⁵ I have illustrated and developed this point in an article "Teaching Ethics in a Core Curriculum: Some Observations," *Teaching Ethics*, 11, 1 (Fall 2001), 69-76. Reprinted in my *Ethical Contexts and Theoretical Issues: Essays in Ethical Thinking* (UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 229-239. In that article I argue that in our exploration of ethical cases, we need to develop our moral sense as human beings and not just as engineers or scientists.

⁶ Personal experience, rather than an a priori claim, backs this point.

⁷ Cf. A.N. Whitehead, *Aims of Education and Other Essays* (N.Y.: The Free Press, 1967), 43-59.

⁸ This concern for the pursuit of wisdom within the context of academia is the theme of our novel, cf. M.F. Sia and S. Sia, *That Elusive Fountain of Wisdom: a Tale of the Human Quest for Knowledge* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015). See the review of this book by Romualdo Abulad in *DIWA: Studies in Philosophy and Theology* 41, Nos. 1-2 (May & November 2016): 93-98.

⁹ *Gesammelte Schriften: Ausgabe Der Preussischen Akademie Der Wissenschaften* (Berlin, 1906-1936), XIII, 266. He also states in "Theory of Human Education" that "the ultimate task of our existence is to give the fullest possible content to the concept of humanity in our own person...through the impact of actions in our lives", a task that "can only be implemented through the links established between ourselves as individuals and the world around us." *Ibid.* I, 283.

¹⁰ Wilhelm von Humboldt argues that "self-education can only be continued... in the wider context of the development of the world." *Ibid.* VII, 33. He also wrote that "the education of the individual requires his incorporation into society and involves his links with society at large." Also, *Ibid.* XIV, 155.

¹¹ See Chapter 4: "Relationships and Communal Living: a View on Types of Relatedness" and Chapter Six: "Ethical Thinking and Formation: A Challenge for Life in Society" in Santiago Sia, *Society in its Challenges: Philosophical Considerations of Living in Society*, Foreword by Mary McAleese (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014; 2015), 65-85, 113-128.

¹² These are stages in my methodology of teaching: *evoke* (gaining the interest of the students), *provoke* (critically reflecting on possible answers),

invoke (drawing on the sources) and *convoke* (enabling them to think through and develop their answers) resulting in the acronym: EPIC.

¹³ The issue of autonomy and pressure on students because of course assignments/examinations inevitably arises, given this emphasis on their personal development. Admittedly, there is always a tension. On the other hand, part of the educational process (and thus of the student's personal development) is to help students to cope with pressure and to organize their work accordingly. Moreover, in the workplace performance review is regularly carried out. What is crucial, in the light of the argumentation in this essay, is that that aspect does not become the most important consideration.

¹⁴ Subjects in the humanities particularly lend themselves to this task of linking the students' concrete experiences with the academic study.

¹⁵ A.N. Whitehead, *Aims of Education*, 15-25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29-41.

¹⁷ We tried to illustrate this in Marian F. Sia and Santiago Sia, *From Question to Quest: Literary-Philosophical Enquiries into the Challenges of Life* (U.K.: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, "Christian Rehumanization of Technological Society," *The Critic* (May-June, 1970): 13.

²⁰ Eric Fromm, *The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanised Technology* (N.Y.: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1968), 2.

²¹ David Bradley, "The Western Crisis and the Attraction of Asian Religions," *Concilium: Theology in the Age of Renewal* 9, no. 6 (November 1970): 136.

²² Moltmann, "Christian Rehumanization," 13.

²³ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (London: Harcourt Brace Publishers, 1934), 81.

²⁴ A particularly helpful and relevant book in this respect is the collection of essays by Sjur Bergan in his aptly-titled book, *Not by Bread Alone* (Council of Europe Publishing, 2011).

²⁵ Cf. Chapter Seven: "Images, Reality and Truth: Some Philosophical Considerations" in *Society in its Challenges*.