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Student Success and Education, with a capital E

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Citation: Yazdi, H.R. (2022). Student Success and Education, with a capital E. The Interdisciplinary Journal of Student Success.

Founding Editor-in-Chief: Masood Zangeneh, Ph.D.

Editor: Hamid R. Yazdi, Ph.D.

Editor: Mona Nouroozifar, Ph.D.

Received: 11/28/2021
Accepted: 05/17/2022
Published: 12/15/2022



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Abstract: N/A

Keywords: Student, Success, Education.

In *Republic*, Plato lays down the parameters for what true education is supposed to do in these terms:

[E]ducation is not what some people boastfully declare it to be. They presumably say they can put knowledge into souls that lack it, as if they could put sight into blind eyes... But here is what our present account shows about this power to learn that is present in everyone's soul, and the instrument with which each of us learns: just as an eye cannot be turned around from darkness to light except by turning the whole body, so this instrument must be turned around from what-comes-to-be together with the whole soul, until it is able to bear to look at what is and at the brightest thing that is – the one we call the good... Of this very thing, then, there would be a craft – namely, of this turning around – concerned with how this instrument can be most easily and effectively turned around, not of putting sight into it. On the contrary, it takes for granted that sight is there, though not turned in the right way or looking where it should look, and contrives to redirect it appropriately (Book 7) (Plato, 2004).

The craft to which Plato refers would be, in modern terms, the practice of teaching. Plato thought if the goal of teaching revolves around putting “sight into blind eyes,” it would be a wasted endeavour. The craft of teaching should instead be centred on helping the learner turn their whole body toward light, and then they will be able to perceive it. This makes sense when put in the context of philosophers in the Socratic tradition. For they believed that the propensity to learn, to *know* even, is already embedded in everyone's soul. Rather than trying to “put knowledge into souls that lack it,” then, a true educator will help the learner “turn around” their soul so they can see the light of truth for themselves.

This brings us to the topic of this issue of the journal: student success. If we hope to have a realistic understanding of student success, we need to revisit our foundational philosophies (or assumptions) about it and how we go about measuring it. Our current educational system is built, it seems, around the idea of measuring “student success.” From tests and assignments to student feedback questionnaires or evaluation forms, class averages, awards and success indicators after graduation, we have erected an enormous educational apparatus around “outcomes-based” learning that obsessively engages in tracking and measuring what it deems to be indicators of “student success.” The supreme question in this system is whether students have met the learning outcomes, can perform the tasks religiously outlined and revered as guidelines in virtually every course outline or syllabus. And if they can perform those tasks, how well? On the basis of their task completion skills, we then reward students with grades and eventually diplomas and send them off into the ‘real’ world of jobs and paycheques.

This is not to say that outcomes-based learning is “bad” or that such institutional practices should be discontinued. But it is to say that as a society, we should be conscious at the very least of our priorities. If the claim is true that Western civilization is erected upon Greek philosophy, it is worth asking to what extent we have deviated from it. To the extent that our educational system is geared toward a capitalist economy that demands us as educational institutions to meet industry standards and train a workforce to feed its juggernaut, we are certainly on the right path. If, therefore, by “student success” we mean training students to perform this or that task successfully in the workforce, then we have done relatively well and continue to do so in today’s competitive economism. But if we believe there is a distinction to be made between *training* and *education*, we have missed the point as per Plato. For training, as Plato thought, can be defined as putting skills into hands that lack it, whereas education, true education, should facilitate for the learner the process of “turning around” their soul. We may have to ask ourselves some difficult but important questions, therefore.

Is institutionalized higher learning in modern society geared toward education in the Platonic sense, or is it focused on job training? Since capitalism is the overarching system to which all working institutions must cater, are we “turning around” our students’ souls sufficiently for them to at least be critical thinkers next to being skilled workers? To what extent are we allowing our students to see and learn for themselves, both institutionally and in the classroom? If we have to teach our students a prescriptive set of skills that must be tailored to specific industry standards, are we at least doing this in a way that fosters creativity and individual innovation? Are we merely putting “knowledge into souls that lack it,” as Plato would say, or are we complementing that with some degree of the “turning around” of their soul? Might we, as educators, have internalized the grade-and-diploma system so much that our own understanding of “student success” is shaped by it? To what extent, as educators, are we functioning as institutional gatekeepers whom the students must “pass” through as a sort of rite of passage before they can integrate into the world of the grown-ups?

In contemplating these questions, perhaps the one thing that presents itself as a redeeming element in, or a way out of, an otherwise conservative educational system is the supreme primacy of critical thinking. There may not be a foreseeable way out of the current system of catering education to industry standards in our curricula and abiding by the exam-and-grade system in our classrooms. But as educators we may at least be able to find redemption in fostering critical thinking in our students. Neither does having to abide by institutional regulations mean that we also have to equate student success with grades earned or jobs landed.

There is certainly room for debate in considering these important questions. Our hope is that the articles in this issue will do just that.

References

Plato (2004). *Republic* (C. D. C. Reeve Trans.). Hackett Publishing Company. (Original work published ca. 375 BCE)